

LIVING THE POLEMIC: THE MEXICAN NOVEL  
IN THE AGE OF *MODERNISMO*, 1876-1908

By

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## Abstract

At the end of the nineteenth century several writers in Mexico and other countries in Spanish America began to experiment with new literary forms and ideas; these intellectuals eventually came to call themselves *modernistas* and their cultural production has come to be known as *modernismo*. Though many studies have analyzed *modernismo* as an hemispheric phenomenon, my approach in this dissertation focuses on the uniquely national issues and circumstances that shaped how *modernismo* developed in Mexico and how *modernismo* shaped Mexican cultural development from 1876 to 1908, a period that corresponds historically with the dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz. Mexican *modernistas* provoked heated debates about the relationship between literature and society as they engaged in conversation with opponents who represented the literary establishment, and in their novels, *modernismo* became an influential discourse that both challenged deterministic worldviews and advocated personal freedom. Bringing together cultural histories of Mexico with more traditional literary analyses, this dissertation traces both the struggles (i.e. between science and religion, tradition and innovation, cosmopolitanism and nationalism) and the continuities (i.e. liberalism and the autonomization of culture) that guided the production, circulation, and consumption of the Mexican novel at the turn of the twentieth century. In my readings of Manuel Gutiérrez Nájera's *Por donde se sube al cielo* and Amado Nervo's *Pascual Aguilera*, *El bachiller*, and *El donador de almas*, I establish the outlines of the *modernista* challenge to materialist explanations of human behavior and the desire to incorporate cosmopolitan culture into Mexico's cultural field. Contrasting these novels with José López Portillo y Rojas's *La parcela* both demonstrates the anxiety that *modernismo* provoked among more traditional writers as well as reveals a shared desire for greater autonomy from politics among Mexico's *fin de siècle* cultural elite. Formal innovation and traditional

nationalism form an uneasy alliance in Carlos González Peña's *La musa bohemia*, which I analyze in terms of the changes made to the *modernista* sensibility by the members of Mexico's *Ateneo de la juventud*. I conclude by documenting several examples of similar literary debates in which traces of the *modernista* discourse can be seen throughout Mexico's twentieth century.

## Acknowledgments

In *El bar* (1996) the Mexican *modernista* Rubén M. Campos recounted many fond memories of the conversations in bars and taverns that nurtured his friendships and shaped the artistic and literary activities at the *Revista Moderna* during the first decade of the twentieth century. Admittedly coffee, rather than beer, fueled most of the writing and research in this dissertation, but even so I share Campos's appreciation for the personal relationships and social interactions that provide context and meaning for intellectual activities like publishing a literary magazine or completing a dissertation.

The members of my dissertation committee helped me develop and polish many of my ideas and modeled for me their unique and excellent expressions of intellectual curiosity, academic rigor, and clear writing style. Drs. Vicky Unruh, Danny Anderson, and Jill Kuhnheim have all challenged and encouraged me throughout my career at KU. Each of them has become a role model for me, both professionally and personally. From my first day at KU, Dr. Stuart Day has been an inspiring mentor and ally; meetings in class and in his office have routinely prompted me to approach literature and literary analysis from new perspectives. I met Dr. Ruben Flores during my Ph.D. studies, and his cheerful attitude and creative historical mind inspired me to think about the *modernistas* from a broader cultural perspective. Drs. Jonathan Mayhew and Anton Rosenthal also provided guidance for this project, both in my coursework and in informal conversations.

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*For Steve and Thom,  
and in memory of Scott.*

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## Introduction

A young woman walks down the street after finishing her daily work in a high-end dressmaker's shop. Her footsteps fall on pavement as she passes by boutiques, cafés, and theaters, far removed from the dirt-packed roads that muddy the boots and sandals of the majority of her countrymen. Moving alongside European-style carriages and dodging dozens of other pedestrians, she captures the attention of a well-dressed man who stands waiting for her outside the Jockey Club, a meeting place for Mexico City's political and cultural elite. The sound of her heels and the sight of her perfectly-tailored dress fill the young man with romantic and erotic affection, so much so that he mentally captures the image to share later with his friends at dinner parties or in the local tavern. In the male poet's gaze the young woman is the apex of beauty in a growing metropolis, and though both young lovers are familiar with the tastes and attitudes of the wealthy classes in Europe and America, the young poet quietly and repeatedly reminds himself: "no hay española, yanqui o francesa, / ni más bonita, ni más traviesa / que la duquesa del Duque Job."

I have constructed this anecdote from Manuel Gutiérrez Nájera's famous poem "La Duquesa Job" (1884) to introduce the setting and experiences that produced a significant moment of literary innovation at the end of the nineteenth century in Mexico. Residents of the capital like Gutiérrez Nájera observed startling transformations in Mexico City's physical environment as commercial enterprise and government investment built spaces for human interaction that could only be understood as "modern." Streetlamps, streetcars, and shop windows moved people and products in new ways that often derived from and gestured to the experience of modernization in the economies and societies of Western Europe. As witnesses of these processes, Gutiérrez Nájera and other writers began to wonder about the relationship

between Mexico and the rest of the world. Their musings led to poems like “La Duquesa Job,” and also to novels, short stories, journalistic chronicles, reviews, and critical essays that explored changes in Mexico’s cultural horizon. Influences inherited from centuries of Spanish colonial rule lingered and mixed with the recent arrival of French literature, which had been both imported by interested readers and also residually consumed from the remnants of the recently-destroyed French imperial outpost that had occupied Mexico City between 1862 and 1867. Confronting more conventional literary practices and attitudes, Gutiérrez Nájera and his peers began to explore the impacts that modernization would and could have on Mexican understandings of beauty, morality, and national identity.

The writers who joined Gutiérrez Nájera in producing innovative *fin del siglo* literature began to call themselves *modernistas* to point toward their interest in new and modern cultural forms. Their cultural attitudes and products, along with similar trends in other parts of Spanish America, constituted a cultural phenomenon known as *modernismo*. With roots in Mexico, Cuba, and Spanish America’s Southern Cone, *modernismo* touched and transformed cultural production in many of the Spanish-speaking countries in the Western Hemisphere at the end of the nineteenth century. Though *modernismo* emerges from the same etymological root as the English-language term *modernism*, and both words denominate cultural practices that desired to change the relationship between art and society, they are not, strictly speaking, the same artistic or literary phenomenon. Responding to anxieties produced by modernization during the *fin del siglo* moment, Spanish American *modernismo* embraced French and non-Spanish European literary practices as a way of establishing independence from the former colonial power, separating a “modern” Spanish America from the legacy of colonial subservience to Spain. *Modernismo* also encouraged the conscious development of literary production through the

acquisition and transformation of a variety of European sources (Rama, *Máscaras* 62-63; González, *Companion* 7). In English-language criticism of Spanish American literature, the term *modernism* often specifically denotes the vanguard artistic movements of the early twentieth century in Europe, the United States, and other cultural centers in the Western World.

Change and transformation characterized the period in which the *modernistas* explored possibilities of narrating Mexico's experience of modernization, and the result was often fiery polemics with the more conservative and traditional figures in Mexico's literary establishment. Public debates regarding literary style regularly filled columns in the Mexico City press, and allowed the *modernistas* both to defend the need for their innovative perspectives, and to articulate their shared commitment to the aesthetic and spiritual idealism that characterized *modernista* literary production. In 1907 an explosive showdown erupted between a group of young intellectuals and an historic figure of the Mexico City press. When Manuel Caballero, a man recognized as Mexico's first reporter, advertised that he planned on resuscitating Gutiérrez Nájera's iconic *Revista Azul* after a decade of dormancy, 33 young intellectuals signed and published a poetic call-to-arms that affirmed both their *modernista* identity and the enduring pursuit of literary innovation and inspiration that had produced *modernismo* earlier in the Porfiriato. Their emphatic retort to Caballero appeared in *El Entreacto*, and included several sentences printed in capital letters:

SOMOS MODERNISTAS, SÍ, PERO EN LA AMPLIA ACEPTACIÓN DE ESE VOCABLO, ESTO ES: CONSTANTES EVOLUCIONARIOS, ENEMIGOS DEL ESTANCAMIENTO, AMANTES DE TODO LO BELLO, VIEJO O NUEVO, Y, EN UNA PALABRA, HIJOS DE NUESTRA ÉPOCA Y NUESTRO SIGLO. ("Protesta" 336)

The signatories of this declaration engaged with Carballo in a public dispute that not only challenged the reporter-publisher's claim to literary authority, but also defined the relevance and urgency of *modernista* cultural activity. Polemics like this one occurred throughout the development of *modernismo* in Mexico, and formed a bridge between literature and the day-to-day disputes among competing groups of writers in the Mexico City cultural scene. While *modernismo* came to be a term applied to contradictory philosophies, it was consistently a confrontational attitude that made literature and literary pursuits a vital aspect of Mexico's social and political life.

As a part of Spanish America's broad experience of modernity, understood here as the political, economic and social practices that accompanied industrialization and the expansion of the bourgeoisie in the Spanish American republics throughout the nineteenth-century, *modernista* artists and intellectuals began to adopt new perspectives on romantic love, spiritual experience, and the role of the individual in society. The polymorphic nature of *modernismo* demands that it be treated as a socio-historical period rather than as a well-defined literary style. Writers who actively participated in *modernista* literary creation often characterized their tastes in relation to time; Max Henríquez Ureña, a Dominican-born writer who lived in Mexico during the first decades of the twentieth century, argued in his *Breve historia del modernismo* (1954) that *modernista* writers like Rubén Darío, from Nicaragua, and José Martí, from Cuba, were part of a "new sensibility" that expressed significant anxiety toward the social transformations of the *fin de siècle* moment (17). As I show here, the new sensibility that arose from personal and social anxiety at the turn of the century throughout Spanish America was uniquely shaped into a discourse of literary innovation and provocation in Mexican *modernista* novels.

This dissertation argues that the *modernista* sensibility in Mexico was produced by Mexico's unique cultural, social, and political environment, and that *modernismo*, in turn, altered the ways in which Mexican identity was represented in literature. Focusing on the immediate cultural and social circumstances of the Mexican *modernistas*, I suggest, is necessary to understand Mexico's relationship with other *modernistas* in Spanish America. Scholars frequently examine *modernismo* in the context of international literary activity. And though the movement of literary ideas and products among countries allowed Spanish American *modernismo* to become an identifiable and politically-relevant movement at the outset of the twentieth century, this study begins by privileging the local and national debates that molded *modernista* ideas and literary forms. Mexican *modernista* writers engaged with peers and audiences throughout the Americas and Western Europe, but their ideas were principally directed toward the cultural and political climate of their immediate environment: Mexico City. Mexican *modernismo* affirmed the value of literature by confronting traditional notions of Mexican identity as well as the growing interest in positivist materialism. This provocative and polemical attitude toward recognizable literary styles and institutions appealed to readers who were curious about the changing moral and social conditions of Mexico's modernizing society. It was also an elitist cultural practice fostered by wealthy individuals who wanted to mold the tastes of Mexico's growing middle class.

After more than a century of critical discussion, the term "*modernismo*" has acquired multiple meanings, not all of them complimentary. Even when *modernismo* was becoming a word used to identify a new group of writers in the 1890s, debates raged about whether or not it was a school, a style, or something new altogether. Given the popularity of positivism in late nineteenth-century Mexican thought, the desire to label and categorize literary innovations at the

turn of the century made sense, but scholars in the twenty-first century are free to recognize that “styles” and “schools” are constructs of the critical mind, and are rarely—if ever—embodied in a single artist, or a single work or art. Unquestionably, *modernista* writers incorporated styles, themes, images, characters, and even plots from European romanticism, parnassianism, symbolism, naturalism, and decadentism, but *modernismo* itself was more than the sum of these influences. Though Mexican critics worried that the European aspects of *modernista* literature threatened the purity of Mexico’s national literary history, both *modernismo* and the social transformations associated with modernization were mediated and contested phenomena that were neither wholly imported from abroad, nor uniformly incorporated into local and national culture. *Modernismo* did not mean the same thing to every *modernista*, but it did point toward a shared feeling among artists and writers that they should be able to act in society *qua* artists, and not as literary extensions of patriots, priests, or patriarchs.

Rather than approaching *modernismo* as a single object of analysis, I regard it here as a discursive formation. In the *Archaeology of Knowledge* Foucault argued that discursive formations have organized Western epistemologies and sciences by imposing an order on language or, put another way, that they are a set of correlations, positions, and functionings on statements (38).<sup>1</sup> *Modernismo* became such a force in Mexico, challenging notions of literary value rooted in traditional liberal and Catholic beliefs with a new set of values and priorities that celebrated the new, the modern, the spiritual, and the ethereal. Writers who contributed to the formation of *modernismo* did not share a specific artistic, political, or social agenda; nevertheless, their works inserted new figures and forces into conversations about the role of literature in Mexican society that collectively directed attention to the role that the individual artist could play in society as a creator of meaning and agent of ethical decisions. The lack of

uniformity across *modernista* works does not diminish the discursive power of *modernismo*; to the contrary, the diverse artistic expressions that could be articulated as part of the *modernista* challenge to Mexico's conventional literary attitudes demonstrates a shift in the systems of power that supported the production and reception of literature and writing at the end of the nineteenth century. In his description of the relationships between objects of discourse, Foucault argues that diverse expressions are often part of discursive formations and that "it is not the objects that remain constant, nor the domain that they form; it is not even their point of emergence or their mode of characterization; but the relation between the surfaces on which they appear, on which they can be delimited, on which they can be analyzed and specified" (47). *Modernismo* in Mexico positioned art and literature as their own surfaces, freed from the restrictive bonds of history and clericalism, but still in conversation with these and other discursive formations in society.

Adopting a somewhat fluid and flexible definition of *modernismo* eschews a common practice that seeks to identify each specific influence and stylistic residue that appears in *modernista* literature. While I recognize the value in analyzing how distinct ideas and philosophies like symbolism, parnassianism, nihilism, and decadentism moved from place to place in the nineteenth century, my aims in this study are different. I defer to the *modernistas* and their critical interlocutors to chart the development of the discourse of *modernismo* throughout the Porfiriato. I seek to draw the critical conversation away from the question "what is *modernismo*?" and, instead, ask "what does *modernismo* do?" or "how is *modernismo* used?" My approach is similar to Daniel Cottom's undertaking in *International Bohemia* (2013), a wide-ranging comparative work of cultural criticism that asks why the word "bohemia" acquired different meanings at different times throughout the nineteenth century in the Western world.<sup>2</sup>

The writers, intellectuals, and visual artists who sought to define, shape, and deploy *modernismo* in Mexico came to call themselves *modernistas* as they gathered around specific arguments and institutions that supported their view of intellectual activity. They were a generation whose written work circulated during the extended presidency of Porfirio Díaz, the military strongman and savvy politician who controlled Mexico's government from 1876 to 1911, a period known to most Mexicans and historians of Mexico as the Porfiriato. After assuming presidential power under the banner of "no re-election," Díaz built a resilient political regime through a complex system of rewards and punishment designed to encourage loyalty from national and regional political bosses. His *pan o palo* strategy allowed the regime to pursue a program of "order and progress" as part of a dynamic modernization campaign that introduced railroads, streetcars, standardized education, modern printing presses, and other industrial age improvements to Mexico's largely agricultural society. Modernizing projects like these were often financed through private foreign investments from the United States and Europe, which brought travellers and immigrants from Great Britain, France, Germany, Spain, and the United States to Mexico. The powerful elite who benefitted from foreign investments and other Porfirian economic and social policies formed what Moisés González Navarro has called the "dominant minority" of the Porfiriato (153). While peasants and rural landholders fumed at the preferential treatment that these foreigners received, offended by the return of foreign interests so soon after the French Intervention (1861-1867), the Díaz regime oversaw the gradual transformation of official institutions through contact with investors and collaborators from abroad.<sup>3</sup>

Bribes, subsidies, and coercion were often used by the Díaz regime to mute the voices of political dissidents; these did not, however, prevent the diversification of cultural expression during the Porfiriato. Opinions expressed on the printed page and in informal intellectual



gatherings (*tertulias*) nurtured a public of writers and intellectuals who aspired to attain power through their words. This community of journalists, poets, novelists, and essayists did not constitute a homogenous “elite culture;” rather their cacophony reveals how elite cultural beliefs and practices began to fracture at the end of the nineteenth century. A growing fascination with French, American, and British culture introduced new literary ideas into the Mexican cultural landscape. In disputes with their critics, *modernista* writers argued that literature would be the aesthetic and moral compass in Mexico’s future, often confronting the positivist philosophy taught at the *Escuela Nacional Preparatoria* (ENP) where generations of Mexico’s young male elite were trained for powerful careers within the Porfirian regime.<sup>4</sup>

*Modernismo* arose in and out of the Porfirian cultural milieu of growth and transformation. In Mexico City an expanding class of educated individuals saw writing as a “lever for upward social movement,” which, in Ángel Rama’s view, introduced new voices into colonial structures of power that governed the use of written language in Spanish American society (*Ciudad* 110). During the last half of the nineteenth-century, technological improvements in printing complemented the advance of public education programs as access to information expanded for audiences of citizens who were eager to participate in political discussion (Bazant 208). According to official estimates, 38% of Mexico City’s residents could read in 1895; by 1910 the number had increased to 50% (González Navarro 532, 681-82). In that metropolitan space at the end of the nineteenth century, newspapers and novels circulated within Mexico’s nascent public sphere, an ideological space free of direct control from the Díaz regime. Even as Díaz’s political hegemony worked to unify political discourse under the dictator’s gaze, the liberal reforms that had been enacted throughout the nineteenth century facilitated the development and circulation of written forms and ideas that did not (exclusively) require state

support or sanction in order to achieve success. And even though the reading public for most literary texts was very small relative to the capital's population, throughout the Porfiriato newspapers, magazines, and books were sites of intense literary activity and debate.

As I focus critical attention on Mexico and the Mexican *modernistas*' preoccupations with their national culture and politics, I seek to highlight the inward-looking perspective of Mexico's *modernista* literature. In Mexico, *modernismo* was neither an exploration of Spanish American cultural identity nor the expression of hemispheric ambitions against the United States' enlarged sphere of influence; it was a fraught struggle between science and religion, between literary convention and innovation, between cosmopolitan ambitions and national traditions. For this reason I argue that Mexico's unique political, cultural, and social circumstances are the initial hermeneutical keys that are essential for interpreting the *modernista* novels published during the Porfiriato. The explosiveness of literary disputes in the Mexican press warrant a Mexico-centered approach both as an alternative and as a complement to the studies of *modernismo* that emphasize the hemispheric connections between *modernistas* in Mexico, the Caribbean, and the Southern Cone. The desire to form a pan-American cultural identity appears in several of the most canonical *modernista* texts, namely José Martí's essay "Nuestra América" (1891), José Enrique Rodó's essay *Ariel* (1900), and Rubén Darío's collection of poetry *Cantos de vida y esperanza* (1905). The critical tendency to interpret *modernismo* as an hemispheric cultural phenomenon reaches back to these writers from other parts of Spanish America; Alejandro Mejías-López has demonstrated that Spanish Americanism—the view that the entire region shared a “strong sense of cultural commonality”—was one of the “inseparable pillars” of *modernismo* that, along with cosmopolitanism and modernity, shaped the reception of the movement in Spain during the first decade of the

twentieth century (74-78). Even though a regional Spanish American poetic and political program was one of the desired outcomes of *modernista* innovation, the formation and evolution of this enterprise often arose from more immediate and local cultural debates. Martí used the Cuban struggle for Independence from Spain, for instance, as a starting point for promoting Spanish American cultural independence. Though discussions of regional and hemispheric identity appeared in the pages of the *Revista Azul* and the *Revista Moderna*, in Mexico the *modernista* discourse became manifest in discussions of domestic cultural and social arrangements. Conflicting ideas about the relationship between national identity and literary production contributed to the formation of *modernista* discourse, which emphasized the need to explore uncertainties that arose from varying degrees of modernization.

Mexican *modernista* writers may not have dedicated significant attention to the formation of a hemispheric identity, but they did address processes of modernization that were often similar to other national and local contexts. Throughout Spanish America *modernista* writers rebelled against traditional expectations concerning the role of art in society, and investigations of the processes through which these writers separated themselves from traditional sources of public authority, especially politics and business, have produced a detailed understanding of the social changes associated with *modernista* literary activity. Sociological approaches to literature have produced detailed descriptions of how literary value and the role of literature in society shifted at the turn of the century. In the 1970s and 80s Ángel Rama and Noé Jitrik analyzed *modernismo* in the context of a “history of writing,” a project that Jitrik attributed to the critical contributions of Jacques Derrida, and to which Rama applied insights from Michel Foucault’s analyses of power. In *La ciudad letrada* (1984), Rama situated *modernismo* against the colonial legacy of Latin America and argued that at the end of the nineteenth century an “incipient autonomization

process” had begun to separate intellectuals from state power, opening opportunities for the expression of the demands of the growing middle class, and even the expanding urban lower class (75). In 1989 Julio Ramos argued that Latin America’s experience of modernity was uneven and that *modernista* intellectuals and literatures were heterogenous products of a process of autonomization that was incomplete because, as a social institution, literature had not “consolidated its material conditions of existence” (55).

To describe the process of autonomization as a cultural and economic phenomenon, literary scholars and historians frequently turn to Pierre Bourdieu’s models of nineteenth-century French culture, which position cultural production as one of several “fields” in society. Using Bourdieu’s framework for discussions of the “cultural field” and its relationship with the “field of power” and the “field of social relations” has led Ignacio Sánchez Prado to observe that autonomization from politics paradoxically allowed artists and intellectuals to exercise political influence more directly in Mexico throughout the twentieth century (91). Mejías-López has also adopted the idea of fields to explore the relationship between Spanish America and Europe at the beginning of the twentieth century, arguing that cultural fields can be transnational and not limited by political borders (50). The sociological line of investigation has brought to light the political and social dimensions of *modernista* literary activity and opened possibilities for exploring the broader social forces involved with the formation, development, and circulation of *modernismo* as part of Spanish America’s experience of modernization.

In several recent studies scholars have approached *modernismo* as a cultural force that not only responded to the political and social conditions of the *fin del siglo* moment, but which also had longstanding effects on Spanish American politics and culture. I seek to contribute to the development of this history of *modernismo* by examining the role that Mexico’s internal

cultural debates played in the formation of Mexican *modernista* discourse. Gerard Aching has emphasized the construction of new “reading constituencies” as a central element of the *modernista* project, particularly directing attention to the ways in which those poets manipulated race and class at a time of economic transition in order to create new cultural identities. Casting the critical gaze in another direction, Mejías-López persuasively argues that *modernismo* should be understood as a transatlantic cultural phenomenon, one in which Spanish America successfully challenged European authority (3). Introducing the economic conversations of the nineteenth century to the analysis of *modernismo*, Ericka Beckman has documented the ideological role that *modernista* prose and poetry played in the development of global capitalism and the formation of Latin America’s export-driven economies. Each of these scholars has demonstrated that *modernismo* had far-reaching impacts beyond the strictly literary or cultural fields, and though none deals with Mexico at length, their insights about similar developments in other parts of Spanish America guide my approach in this dissertation.

Understanding the role of Mexican *modernista* writers in society is an interdisciplinary enterprise that has benefitted from work done by generations of historians of Mexico. In the historical analyses of newspapers and other print sources, these historians have also noticed the important role that intellectuals and their written work played in the political, social, and economic transformations produced by modernization in Mexico. Of particular interest for the purposes of this study are the histories of the Porfiriato that have examined the role that liberalism played in the formation of new policies and attitudes expressed toward political participation, education, public health, and business. Liberalism, Daniel Cosío Villegas wrote in the introduction to the fourth volume of the monumental *Historia Moderna de México* (1955), created a new sense of individualism in nineteenth-century Mexican society that was supported

by the expansion of the press and improvements in public education (xvii). Charles Hale later explored the development of liberalism in the Porfiriato more directly in his pivotal *The Transformation of Liberalism in Late Nineteenth-Century Mexico* (1989), plotting the internal divisions that emerged within liberal discourses and between factions in the Porfirian regime as political and social thought shifted over the course of the thirty-five year dictatorship. In a follow-up study, Hale chronicled the life and work of Emilio Rabasa to understand the impact that the Mexican Revolution had on political and judicial philosophy and practice in Mexico; Rabasa's novels play an important role in Hale's description of Porfirian intellectual life. As I show in this dissertation, liberalism played an important role in the defense of *modernista* artistic practices, and I look to the work of historians like Cosío Villegas, Hale, and others who have explored the role that intellectual activity played in Porfirian society.

In the paradigm of Cultural Studies, literary scholars and historians share many interpretive tools and objectives that can produce detailed descriptions and analyses of texts and cultural production. Cultural histories have long accepted novels and literature as useful sources, but *modernismo* and the literary debates of the late nineteenth century have only recently become part of historical analyses of the Porfiriato. Pablo Piccato has explored topics of masculinity, criminality, public space, and the public sphere in several books and articles on Porfirian and Revolutionary Mexico. He makes regular use of novels, poetry, and speeches in his historical analyses, affirming the powerful role that literary works held for readers and writers alike as they fashioned and reacted to new policies and ideas. Mauricio Tenorio-Trillo has adopted a similar approach in his studies of the formation of Mexico's national identity during the Porfiriato, especially in *I Speak of the City* (2012), an impressive history of Mexico City after 1880. Approaching language itself as a product of historical processes, he seeks to understand how

“scientific, popular, colloquial, artistic, or sentimental” words reveal changes in the social climate of Mexico City (355). In dialogue with Piccato and Tenorio-Trillo, my investigation of *modernista* literary activity continues to bring cultural history and literary analysis together to understand how literature was both a product and producer of Porfirian culture.

The novel in Porfirian Mexico was a work of social language; it communicated moral and social values to readers through recognizable character types, settings, and moral dilemmas. Óscar Mata has observed that pedagogical principles obviously structured the relationship between Mexican writers and their audiences, even in short novels like those written by Gutiérrez Nájera and Nervo:

Durante el siglo XIX se pensaba que la literatura debía difundir las verdades, sobre todo las morales, por lo que cada escritor se convertía en un educador, que pugnaba en sus escritos por lograr la unión de lo útil con lo bello. El lamentable nivel educativo de la sociedad mexicana hacía imperativa esa consigna, de allí que la literatura mexicana decimonónica tenga un claro tono didáctico. (36)

Novels staged moral dilemmas more directly than poetry because readers were attuned to the heavy-handed narrative tools that clearly specified “appropriate” moral and aesthetic criteria for readers. In the readings that follow the didacticism inherent in Porfirian novel genre conventions facilitates a discussion of the relationships between literary, moral, and social ideas from the late nineteenth century. While the *modernista* novels that I take up here mostly leave the didactic style of Mexican narrative intact, they also question, challenge, and adjust assumptions about morality and social order that other novels sought to preserve.

At the beginning of this introduction I fashioned a prose anecdote out of some of the most well-known verses of Mexican *modernista* poetry; my focus on prose in this dissertation,

particularly novels and journalistic polemics, could be seen as a similar move to shift the focus in studies of Mexican *modernismo* away from poetry. While my choice is deliberate, it is not meant to deny the immense influence or power that *modernista* poetry held for Porfirian readers or for generations of critics that almost exclusively used verse in their histories and critical accounts of the *modernista* contribution to Mexican letters.

For most of the twentieth century the *modernista* novel was a part of anthologies and histories of Spanish American literature, but in the 1980s two lengthy studies demonstrated through close reading that the *modernista* novel merited close analytical treatment by scholars interested in the formation of the twentieth-century Spanish American novel. With *La novela decadente en Venezuela* (1984), Jorge Olivares documented several theories regarding the origins of *decadentismo* and *modernismo* and weighed them against textual evidence. He argued that detractors of *modernista* style misunderstood the movement and that stylistic peculiarities like spiritual motifs, sick protagonists, labored images and metaphors were not “defects” of style, but rather “effects” of the social and cultural complexities faced by Spanish American writers at end of the nineteenth century (30). Aníbal González approached the *modernista* novel from a different perspective in his *La novela modernista hispanoamericana* (1987), in which he applied insights from his earlier *La crónica modernista hispanoamericana* (1983) to argue that journalistic, philological, and literary discourses and institutions allowed the *modernista* novel to “textually modernize” Spanish America (19). González observed that several *modernista* novels interrogated the role that intellectuals could and should play in society, a rhetorical practice that, in his view, is a clear watershed between pre- and post-*modernista* fiction (28). Furthermore, he suggested that *modernista* novels were “records of a profound and sustained search for definition, of legitimacy, not only on an aesthetic or cultural plane, but also on the political



plane” (27-28). The need to search for legitimacy based on changing and complex social circumstances has, following Olivares’s and González’s pioneering work, become the starting point for studies of the *modernista* novel.<sup>5</sup>

While *modernista* prose was recognized in many bibliographies and histories of Mexican literature throughout the twentieth century, it has only recently begun to attract critical attention. The massive effort of collecting and publishing prose texts and critical publications has been the work of dozens of researchers at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM), particularly the book series “Al siglo XIX, Ida y regreso.” Initiated in 1994, the series has published dozens of volumes on historical figures, events, and cultural phenomena, ranging from jurisprudence to the role of cafés in Mexican culture. Under the direction of Vicente Quirarte, “Al siglo XIX, Ida y regreso” has provided scholars of Mexican history and culture with easily-accessible source material as well as a foundational description of the circumstances that facilitated textual production in Mexico during the Porfiriato. Another essential resource for scholars of Mexican *modernismo* has been the anthology *La construcción del modernismo* (2002), edited by Belem Clark de Lara and Ana Laura Zavala Díaz. That collection, published in the UNAM’s paperback series *Biblioteca del Estudiante Universitario* is a compact edition of 6 articles from Mexican newspapers that documented many public disputes that arose out of *modernista* activity from 1876 to 1907; drawing from previous scholarship that had identified these articles and their importance to the *modernista* movement, the anthology brings together dozens of primary source documents that reveal the contentiousness of the literary disputes of the Porfiriato.

One of the most important contributions of the “Al siglo XIX, Ida y regreso” series was *La república de las letras* (2005), edited by Clark de Lara and Elisa Speckman Guerra. In the

the three-volume collection of essays Clark de Lara, a literary scholar, and Speckman Guerra, an historian, brought together over a hundred unique articles about Mexican writers as they compiled one of the most detailed histories of Mexican literature currently in print. The title *República de las letras* labels the bitter rivalries and stark divisions between nineteenth-century writers that shaped Mexican politics and culture. Speckman Guerra defines the “Republic of Letters” as the “universe populated by printed materials with different themes and formats, materials which responded to various interests and audiences” (I, 47). Her definition resonates with Jerrold Siegel’s use of the term “Republic of Letters” in an analysis of nineteenth century literature and journalism from France, England and Germany: “The Republic of Letters [...] proclaimed the principle of equal access for all those who had some degree of literary or intellectual competence, rejecting (as irrelevant, restrictive, or divisive) religious and ideological criteria both for membership and for judging the uses people made of the assets to which it gave access” (19). Siegel’s understanding of the Republic certainly would have been accepted by men like Gutiérrez Nájera during the Mexican Porfiriato, and I seek to show in this dissertation that *modernismo* was critical for the formation of an open community of cultural production in Mexico.

In each chapter that follows I explore how the *modernistas* used their novels and articles in the Mexico City press to provoke and alter traditional expectations about the role of literature in society. In *Los hijos del limo* (1974) Octavio Paz observed a “tradition of rupture” in the literatures of Spanish America, Europe, and the United States published after the mid-nineteenth century; even before modernism became dominant in Western culture, *modernista* writers used rupture to alter tastes and expectations in Mexico’s cultural field. Following the polemics that shaped *modernista* discourse, a whole sequence of public struggles between literary styles,

approaches, worldviews, and generations extends from the nineteenth century to the twenty-first.<sup>6</sup> The experience of modernity in Mexico inspired the growth of cultural expression and the autonomization of culture from politics, the church, and other traditional sources of patronage. New canons and institutions protected and perpetuated the works of certain authors, but even the most recent innovators come to be seen as traditional by the next group of energetic writers. Paz suggests that polemic is a characteristic of modernity throughout the Western World: “La modernidad es una tradición polémica y que desaloja a la tradición imperante, cualquiera que ésta sea; pero la desaloja sólo para, un instante después, ceder el sitio a otra tradición que, a su vez, es otra manifestación momentánea de la actualidad” (16). For Mexico’s *modernista* generation, the desire to continually renew the relationship between literature and society became an essential aspect of their discourse. From Gutiérrez Nájera’s initial desire for a more cosmopolitan literary identity to the *Ateneo de la Juventud*’s insistence that literature deal more explicitly with Mexican history, geography, and customs, *modernismo* expressed and defended the distinct role of the intellectual as an aesthetic, moral, and often spiritual guide for readers grappling with changing social circumstances.

The first chapter, “Reimagining Mexico with Manuel Gutiérrez Nájera,” explores the polemical posture of Manuel Gutiérrez Nájera in reaction to the programmatic realism and patriotism of Mexico’s literary establishment after the triumph of Benito Juárez and the establishment of the liberal state in the 1870s. Here, I read the poet-journalist’s only novel, *Por donde se sube al cielo* (1882), in which the experiences of a young Parisian actress urgently express the need to find non-materialist strategies for confronting aesthetic and moral crises brought about by processes of modernization. In my analysis I show how Gutiérrez Nájera synthesizes a cosmopolitan literary style that celebrates classical images of beauty (what later

comes to be regarded as an important element of *modernista* style) with specific social and ethical issues that Mexico City's intellectual circles could easily recognize. Both the style and content of the novel challenge materialist theories of social, spiritual, and aesthetic progress, positioning Christian spirituality in the place of these assumptions as the protagonist searches for personal salvation. At the same time resuscitating Catholic imagery from Mexico's colonial past and introducing ethereal experience as a new and powerful force necessary to confront the changing social landscape in modern Mexico, Gutiérrez Nájera's novel opens new horizons of literary expression which directly challenged many conventional literary tropes. But as a provocateur, Gutiérrez Nájera was not entirely progressive: though in many ways he sought to preserve artistic freedom from constricted expectations, his novel also reaffirms gendered expectations of social behavior which tended to restrict women within a well-defined private sphere.

As Gutiérrez Nájera became more influential among Mexico City's intellectual elite, he also became a lightning-rod in literary conversations, accumulating significant cachet for articulating a new role for Mexican literature in society. When the *Revista Azul* appeared on the streets of Mexico City in 1894, Gutiérrez Nájera and his co-publisher, Carlos Díaz Dufoo, showed the capital city that a new generation of writers was ready to take Mexican culture in a uniquely "modern" direction. Among this new generation was Juan Crisóstomo Ruiz de Nervo, better known as Amado Nervo, a young writer whose prose created shocking images and situations out of immaterial experiences. In the second chapter, "The cult of *el ideal* in the early novels of Amado Nervo," I take up *Pascual Aguilera* (1892), *El bachiller* (1895), and *El donador de almas* (1899), Nervo's three novels from the 1890s that develop a fluidly-defined concept of aesthetic and moral idealism to confront the uncertainty produced by changing power

relationships in Mexico's modernized society. Once Gutiérrez Nájera had gestured toward Catholic spirituality as an alternative source of morality and beauty for writers committed to improving society through literature, Nervo went on to demonstrate that a literary exploration of immaterial religious, aesthetic, and psychological experiences could guide individuals to make moral decisions according to their free will. Firmly rejecting determinism, Nervo positioned *el ideal* as an orientation point to guide human behavior in the unpredictable milieu of modern commerce, sexuality, and spirituality. Along with these novels, written before his entry in Mexico's diplomatic service, Nervo also defended the literary attitudes and practices of the new generation of *modernista* writers from conservative critics, bringing *modernismo*'s discursive power directly into public debates about Mexico's literary and cultural identity.

The debates provoked by *modernismo* in Mexico aggravated long-standing disagreements between conservatives and liberals that had been politically resolved in the civil wars and French Intervention of the mid-nineteenth century. Cultural tensions between conservatives and liberals, however, were held over into the Porfiriato, particularly regarding disagreements about the role of the Catholic Church in Mexican society. One of the most outspoken conservative literary figures was Victoriano Agüeros, a journalist and publisher who regularly debated with Gutiérrez Nájera in the 1880s. The third chapter, "*Modernismo*'s Conservative Critics: Victoriano Agüeros and José López Portillo y Rojas," examines the role that critics of *modernismo* played in the formation of the movement after Gutiérrez Nájera and Nervo had given shape to *modernista* discourse. Skeptical about the consequences of modernization and possessed with fervent religious belief, Agüeros challenged the development of cosmopolitan tastes that he perceived to be immoral; instead of embracing cosmopolitanism, he urged Mexican authors to turn to national history and to present readers with virtuous models of behavior. His passions led him to publish

the *Biblioteca de Autores Mexicanos*, a collection which included José López Portillo y Rojas' novel *La parcela* (1898). In this chapter I demonstrate how Agüeros shared several beliefs with Gutiérrez Nájera about the role of literature in society, but that his tastes became more nationalistic—and pessimistic—as a response to *modernista* innovation. *La parcela* confronts the unease produced by *modernismo* with blunt stereotypes that reinforce the traditional values of rural society in Porfirian Mexico. Depictions of *modernista* tastes and attitudes in the novel show that *modernismo* had become a powerful discourse that threatened the conservatives' vision of Mexico's literary identity. Nevertheless, the desire to use literature to challenge and provoke readers toward social improvement shows that even the critics of *modernismo* could be inspired by the new generation's discomfort with the literary status quo.

By focusing on Mexico's geographic, historical, and cultural specificity, both Agüeros and López Portillo advanced a critique of *modernismo* that almost ten years later was incorporated in the expression of Mexican literary and cultural identity by a group of writers and intellectuals known as the *Ateneo de la juventud*. The central issue in the fourth chapter, "The Uneasy Alliance between *Modernismo* and Nationalism in Carlos González Peña's *La musa bohemia*" is the refashioning of *modernista* cultural practices that felt stagnant to González Peña and other members of the *Ateneo*. The conflicts and tensions represented in the novel propose that the intellectual must abandon his romantic detachment, adopt a socially-conscious stance toward his geographic and social environment, and exploit Mexico's cultural uniqueness instead of focusing on the European features of Mexican culture. The protagonist's inability to adapt his writing to the needs of modern audiences is a sign of his anachronism and his greed; the novel, however, demonstrates that a new kind of writing *is* possible, one which uses realistic, mimetic observation and narration without losing sight of aesthetic and moral ideals.

Each chapter of this dissertation focuses on a distinct moment and aspect of the development of Mexican *modernismo*. By closely reading *modernista* novels alongside another written by a respectful critic, the ambitions of *modernista* activity take shape against a backdrop of cultural uneasiness with the effects of modernization. For the literary elite in Mexico City at the end of the nineteenth century, these novels brought narrative life to arguments about Mexican culture that filled the editorial pages of major metropolitan newspapers and magazines where Mexico's writer class competed for attention and commissions. Recognizing that the novel itself is a literary form that incorporates writing styles and practices from other genres—as Bakhtin famously wrote in “Discourse in the Novel:” “the style of a novel is to be found in the combination of its styles”—in each chapter I look to other journalistic prose and statements about literary philosophy to inform my reading of *modernismo* (262). The desire for artistic freedom extends throughout the period that I explore here, but it produces very different reactions along the way.

The geographic centrality of Mexico's capital in literary, cultural, and political matters at the end of the nineteenth century guides me to pragmatically bracket the limited role of writers and publishers in other parts of the country from this dissertation. The metropolis in the Valley of Mexico has continuously been the site of the nation's political power, and from the establishment of the first printing press in the sixteenth century has also been an important center of publishing. In 1910, official estimates counted 720,753 individuals in the Federal District (4.7% of the Mexican population), and at the same time Mexico City was the home to a quarter of the country's newspapers (González Navarro 10; 681). Publishers in provincial capitals also published magazines and small literary reviews that circulated local prose and poetry, but the capital was home to more writers and readers than any other city in Mexico.<sup>7</sup> Almost half of

Mexico City's population was literate in Spanish by 1910, surpassing the thirty percent literacy rates in Baja California, Colima, Quintana Roo, Sonora, Nuevo León and Coahuila, and far outstripping the lowest literacy levels in the impoverished states of Southern Mexico (González Navarro 532). Even though Mexico City was—and still is—the center for literary and journalistic production, the attitudes and practices that writers brought with them from the outlying states certainly affected the representations of urban and rural life—aside from Gutiérrez Nájera, all of the authors discussed in the chapters that follow were born and raised outside of Mexico City.

The other obvious limitation to this dissertation is the exclusive focus on male writers. Mexican women certainly consumed *modernista* literature, but even the *modernistas* did not always celebrate the growing influence of women in literary culture. José María Martínez has noted that the works of both Gutiérrez Nájera and Nervo demonstrate familiarity and sympathy with an audience of elite women readers; Martínez also documents a comment in which Ciro B. Ceballos, an influential *modernista* critic, denigrated Nervo's poetry for its popularity among women, calling Nervo's audience "cursi" ("El público femenino" 390). No female writer regularly published in the *Revista Azul*, the *Revista Moderna*, or *Savia Moderna*, though two women, Laura Méndez de Cuenca and María Enriqueta Camarillo, wrote prose and poetry in the Porfiriato that have been interpreted through a *modernista* lens, notably by Bart Lewis. Both women participated in Mexico's *fin de siècle* literary culture, just as other women writers were forming newspapers and magazines that articulated new representations of women in modern society. The changing roles of women in society inspired several works of fiction during the Porfiriato, yet the creators of that literature continued to be almost entirely male, leaving the daughters of the turn of the century almost entirely out of the conversation.



Still, women appear as central protagonists in all of the *modernista* novels discussed in this dissertation, and in two of them, their taste in literature, as depicted by these male authors, poses important questions about the role of women in Mexican society to the audience of implied readers. In each chapter I read novels written by male writers, and though I frequently examine how gender-based expectations of behavior organize the *modernista* challenge to traditional aesthetic and social beliefs, I have chosen to leave a reading of Méndez de Cuenca's *El espejo de Amarilis* (1902) for the next phase of this project.

One of the most important factors in the formation of Mexican *modernista* discourse was debate; at several moments throughout the Porfiriato, the explorations and innovations of *modernista* writers were challenged by critics who defended traditional literary and moral values. Out of the public back-and-forth arguments emerged a continual evaluation and reevaluation of the relationship between literature and public life in Porfirian society. While the reading public for the poetry and prose that drove these debates was composed of a tiny fraction of Mexico's population, the ideas that they debated had significant implications for public education campaigns, the political stability of the Díaz regime, and the representation of Mexico as it sought attention in the cosmopolitan community of nations. Far from articulating a single aesthetic viewpoint or a specific social agenda, the *modernistas* fashioned their discourse on artistic liberty and argued that the development of new literary attitudes was essential in a country where new investments, institutions, and social arrangements had begun to shape the modern Mexican nation. Even after the eruption of the Mexican Revolution in 1910, the combative habits that characterized *modernista* intellectual activity endured; Mexican intellectuals, writers, artists, and activists throughout the twentieth century adopted several of the

same tactics and strategies used by the *modernistas*, including public debate of literary ideas, the establishment of new magazines, and group declarations of aesthetic and political positions.

### Chapter One: Reimagining Mexico with Manuel Gutiérrez Nájera

A young writer looks out the window at the rain falling on a soporific Mexico City. As he gives thanks for the tranquility of his domestic life, his thoughts turn to the protagonist of the recently completed novel that lies on his desk. Looking down at the white pages, he feels as though the young woman, who he describes as his “poor, sick one,” impatiently calls to him, begging for her story to be told. As he thinks about the protagonist’s journey, the writer’s thoughts drift away from his comfortable home, through the window, and into the rain. He stands watching the cleansing water fall on the city landscape and hopes that the renewal of the natural environment will strengthen the sound of the “hymn of youth and life” that inspires his writing (4). Thunder and lightning fill the air. “If I had a child,” he thinks, it would be a great chance to watch him sleep. And as the writer’s thoughts anticipate the scene after the storm, he conjures images that pleasantly evoke sensorial experiences of natural life: the touch of sunlight on the backs of bees, the smell of soft earth, the piercing azure of a clear sky. Relaxing into his reflections, the writer settles to watch the rest of the storm from his warm study.

This scene sets the stage for the story of Magda, a bourgeois courtesan who longs to escape the emptiness of Parisian nightlife and discover romantic faithfulness. It is a dedicatory prelude to *Por donde se sube al cielo*, the only novel written by Manuel Gutiérrez Nájera (1859-1895). When the serially-published chapters of the novel appeared in *El Noticioso*, a popular newspaper in Guadalajara, in the summer of 1882, readers were transported to the streets of Paris as they watched Magda return home from the theater.<sup>1</sup> They witnessed her travel from an elaborately furnished apartment to visit a quiet spa on the coast of France where she confronts a romantic and economic dilemma: maintain her relationship with Carlos Provot, a respectable businessman who does not intend to marry her, or accept the advances of Raúl, a quiet young

man who feels love for the first time when he encounters her Parisian beauty. Throughout the novel, Gutiérrez Nájera transforms an otherwise stereotypical romantic story of redemption and purity into a complex representation of shifting social expectations in which aesthetic beauty, artistic creation, and good taste guide the moral judgments of the characters, the narrative voice, and the implied reading public. But when the novel ends without resolving Magda's journey toward purification, readers are left in an uncertain position regarding the viability of the novel's challenge to the growing influence of materialism in Mexican society and culture.

The image of the writer staring through the window and conjuring images of youthful renewal in the dedication to *Por donde se sube al cielo* provides several points of contact with the stylistic attributes of *modernismo*. Gutiérrez Nájera has been frequently cited as one of the first *modernista* writers in the hemisphere, and with good reason. His poetry and journalism inspired generations of Mexican writers to cultivate and circulate aesthetic values based on classical beauty and moral purity.<sup>2</sup> Within the thousands of pages of his corpus, Magda is one of his most vibrant creations, a vivid manifestation of his aesthetic ideals who must face the changing moral and social expectations associated with modern life in late nineteenth-century Mexico.

Along with the image of the writer, the dedication also offers readers an anxious scene in which the desire for renewal emerges from the symbolic use of the child, the rain, and the pages of the finished novel. The tumultuous present and the hope for a new beginning parallel the cultural climate of Mexico during the beginning of the Porfirian era (1876-1911). Following Independence in 1821, Mexico's political leaders struggled for decades to resolve a conflict between liberalism and conservatism, a debate that reached a fever pitch when, in 1857, Benito Juárez signed a new Constitution guaranteeing many individual and municipal liberties. After the

French Intervention (1861-1867) and the defeat of Maximilian and the Conservative party, Juárez and his liberal compatriots began to build institutions that could guide Mexico's economic and political development. Literature was an important part of this enterprise, offering society the characters, images, and stories that celebrated liberal ideals and defined Mexican identity.

In *Por donde se sube al cielo* Gutiérrez Nájera expressed his aesthetic idealism in a recognizable world where choices have consequences and the individual is free to act according to the desires in her heart and mind. In this chapter I argue that El Duque Job's novel staged a conflict over literary style and national identity by emphasizing the unknown and uncertain byproducts of processes of modernization. By synthesizing a cosmopolitan literary style that celebrated classical images of beauty with the specific social and ethical concerns of Mexico City's intellectual circles, the novel challenged materialist theories of social and spiritual progress that accompanied the development of the liberal state after the French Intervention. Materialism extends beyond the commodification of art and includes the positivist philosophical paradigm that facilitated the development of literary realism. Gutiérrez Nájera rejected both forms of materialism as he proposed a more subjectivist paradigm in which the individual is free to pursue beauty and purity. This freedom was neither hedonistic nor did it encourage the discovery of entirely subjective definitions of beauty. In a somewhat contradictory way, the resolution of Magda's anxiety is a loss of freedom rooted in subservience to Catholic morals and participation in wage labor. The rejection of traditional symbols of wealth further emphasizes the vital need for a new moral order and also positions literary taste as a tool uniquely responsible for developing decision-making skills. Sidestepping the fraught European/Mexican binary opposition, the novel brings European cultural experiences to bear on Mexican reality to stage unresolved dilemmas arising from Mexico's experience of modernization.

Gutiérrez Nájera was, according to many Mexican literary critics and historians, the most important writer of the Porfirian era. As a journalist and poet, he inspired hundreds of young men<sup>3</sup> to question their attitudes toward art and to cultivate an aesthetics of idealism and inspiration. He was a new kind professional writer in nineteenth-century Mexico, a man who lived entirely from his writing, and who used writing to gain notoriety and influence. As modernization transformed Mexico City, Gutiérrez Nájera explored the new spaces and forms available for the expression of literary, political, and social ideas. Ana Elena Díaz Alejo has written that his position in society and his attention to style allowed him to exercise a strong influence on Mexican literature because: “a Gutiérrez Nájera, poeta, músico y pintor, maestro del lenguaje, correspondió, por mágico sino, descubrir, hacer suyas y transmitir las verdades de su momento” (82). José Emilio Pacheco has suggested that although his poetry was widely read, it was his prose and personal influence that had the most lasting impact (4). This influence was earned through years of polemical journalism in which Gutiérrez Nájera intellectually jousted with some of Mexico’s most powerful men of letters. Born in 1859 to Manuel Gutiérrez, a newspaper editor and romantic dramatist, and María Dolores Nájera, a very religious woman who oversaw her son’s education, Gutiérrez Nájera was part of Mexico City’s first generation of *letrados* after the French Intervention.<sup>4</sup> He submitted his first journalistic articles when he was 16, and though during his early years as a journalist he was often accused—accurately—of plagiarism, he was able to build substantial cachet as a brilliant and energetic young writer who fearlessly debated with some of Mexico’s most important writers, including Justo Sierra and Vicente Riva Palacio.<sup>5</sup> He wrote articles that appeared in dozens of newspapers in Mexico City, including *La Libertad*, *El Nacional*, *El Partido Liberal*, and *El Universal*; these articles were frequently signed with one of Gutiérrez Nájera’s many pseudonyms, among them El Duque Job,

Monsieur Can-Can, Frú-Frú, Puck, Junius, and Recamier.<sup>6</sup> More than a century later critics and historians continue to refer to Gutiérrez Nájera as El Duque Job in commentaries, histories, and essays. In addition to his literary polemics, Gutiérrez Nájera also wrote poetry, theatrical reviews, and short prose pieces known as *crónicas*. The energy of his journalistic activity and his pursuit of aesthetic ideals culminated in the foundation of the *Revista Azul* in 1894, a literary magazine that promoted the values and styles associated with *modernismo* in Spanish America.<sup>7</sup> Carlos Díaz Dufoo, co-founder of the *Revista Azul* and influential newspaperman, claimed that the eccentric publication was open to all who loved beauty: “Para todos los que aman la belleza y son amados por ella están abiertas [...] nuestros salones de techadumbre azul..... porque es el cielo su techadumbre” (31). Gutiérrez Nájera died in 1895, and the *Revista Azul* folded soon after in 1896.

El Duque Job was also part of the Porfirian political scene, serving as a *diputado* for the State of Mexico from 1888 until his death (Gómez de Prado 17). Many nineteenth-century Mexican writers were prominent politicians, and Gutiérrez Nájera’s participation in the legislature corresponded with his prominent position in society as well as his commitment to guiding Mexico toward modernity. Although the relationship between Gutiérrez Nájera and the Díaz regime has not been rigorously studied, most scholars have identified the poet’s sympathies for Díaz’s consolidation of power and the production of the so-called “Pax Porfiriana.”<sup>8</sup> José María Martínez reads these sympathies as a profound contradiction within El Duque Job’s corpus, separating him from the more aggressive political and social commentary of other Spanish American *modernista* writers (174). This contradiction, however, does not delegitimize Gutiérrez Nájera’s social commentary; instead, as Martínez concedes, it places him in line with the majority of the Mexican intellectual class of the late nineteenth century. Pablo Piccato has

argued that Mexican journalists after the French Intervention built a public sphere by weaving political, literary, and bureaucratic recognition into fluid and influential careers. These men recognized in Porfirio Díaz's centralizing policies, in addition to the dictator's personality cult, an opportunity to realize plans for nation building. For Gutiérrez Nájera, the alternative to the Porfirian order was a destructive anarchy.

The politics and poetics that Gutiérrez Nájera advanced in *Por donde se sube al cielo* also appeared in his poetry and journalism, the two genres of his oeuvre that have been most frequently analyzed. Conventions associated with reading and writing novels in the nineteenth century molded El Duque Job's vision of the modern aesthetic, moral, and social order within the outlines of a recognizable narrative world. The novel was an immensely popular genre in Porfirian literary circles, and although theater, poetry, and short fiction also circulated widely, the novel's overwhelming popularity installed it in a privileged position over the other genres. González Nájera recognized that the novel's form afforded it a special place in the public sphere, even as he bemoaned the impact on the theater: "El dramaturgo no puede desmontar la máquina humana para irnos enseñando todas sus ruedas; el dramaturgo no puede desenrollar las inmensas tiras de las tesis filosóficas, y por eso el novelista que dispone de mayor espacio y de más completa libertad, le gana al público" ("El teatro español" 149-50). Taking advantage of the space and time afforded to a serial novelist, Gutiérrez Nájera creates in *Por donde se sube al cielo* a unique representation of aesthetic and spiritual ideals, staging them with other ideas in a dialogic environment that cannot be achieved in other parts of his corpus.

Gutiérrez Nájera shared a fear of social anarchy with Ignacio Altamirano (1834-1893), the influential writer, publisher, and teacher who inspired a literary renaissance in Mexico after the French Intervention. El Duque Job admired Altamirano and described him in 1889 as an



American poet *por excelencia* (*Obras* 1, 362). For decades, Altamirano encouraged Mexican writers to develop their skills and share poetry, history, and, above all, novels with the Mexican people. In the pages of *El Renacimiento*, a literary magazine published in 1869, Altamirano issued the call to arms for literary nationalism that propelled him into the national spotlight; as a professor, journalist, newspaper editor, and ambassador, he was one of the most respected public men of letters in late nineteenth-century Mexico. In the same 1889 article, *El Duque Job* explained that “No tenemos otro literato más literato que él.” The *literato* in this case was the critic as writer, the torchbearer for writing with whom González Nájera felt great affinity.

In many ways Gutiérrez Nájera’s *Por donde se sube al cielo* is consistent with Altamirano’s prescriptions for novel form and function written after the French Intervention at the outset of the Restored Republic.<sup>9</sup> Yet Gutiérrez Nájera avoided the fierce nationalism of Altamirano’s literary politics and, instead, encouraged the formation of a more cosmopolitan literary environment. He believed in Altamirano’s liberal ideology of literary production, the view that literature should be a pedagogical tool for the formation of values and identity among national citizens, but he also introduced new stylistic flourishes, many of them borrowed from European literatures, that emphasized the uncertain outcome of the events described in the novel’s plot. Gutiérrez Nájera’s fiction must be interpreted against the Porfirian mosaic of socially-conscious and idealistic narratives, stories which accompanied the government’s projects to reform and modernize the nation.

Surveying the world stage at the conclusion of the French occupation, Altamirano hoped that literature could be an *arma de defensa* against European writers who sought to define Mexican identity from abroad (16). In a canonical summary and review of Mexico’s literary environment in 1868 Altamirano claimed that the novel was a powerful organ that propagated

progressive social, moral, and political beliefs (34). In his view, novels like *Les Miserables* and *Uncle Tom's Cabin* had changed social thought forever, and Mexican novels, he hoped, could do the same. The novel was the essential element of intellectual and cultural modernization in Altamirano's conception of nationalist literary activity:

La novela ocupa ya un lugar respetable en la literatura, y se siente su influencia en el progreso intelectual y moral de los pueblos modernos. Es que ella abre hoy campos inmensos a las indagaciones históricas, y es la liza en que combaten todos los días las escuelas filosóficas, los partidos políticos, las sectas religiosas; es el apóstol que difunde el amor a lo bello, el entusiasmo por las artes. (29)

For Altamirano and the generation of writers who explored Mexican society through prose after the French intervention, the novel was not an isolated aesthetic object: it was an essential tool for education and social change.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, Altamirano believed that the mass public also needed to acquire aesthetic tastes that would reflect Mexico's ascendant place in the cosmopolitan community of nations: "la novela tiene también por objeto enseñar e introducir el buen gusto y el refinamiento en un país" (74).

*Por donde se sube al cielo* clearly satisfies several aspects of Altamirano's definition of the novel's form and function in late nineteenth-century Mexico. Enthusiasm for the arts and the love of beauty saturate the novel, and the desire to foster intellectual progress and modernization is evident at the outset of the author's dedication. The intersection of diverse moral and philosophical positions embodied in the characters in the novel propel the narrative forward. The novel does not completely resolve the contradictions and disagreements of the characters' ideas; nevertheless, its aesthetic style does invite the reading public to consider moral progress and its relationship to aesthetic beauty in a recognizable social environment.<sup>11</sup>

*Por donde se sube al cielo* was Gutiérrez Nájera's only novel in an *oeuvre* dominated by poetry and journalism. This may explain why *El Duque Job* has not been critically read into the history of the Mexican novel, save by Belem Clark de Lara. The novel presents the reading public with powerful messages about appropriate social, moral, and aesthetic behaviors that express the ideas that the young writer had promoted in his journalism and other short prose pieces throughout his career. As Clark de Lara explains: "*Por donde se sube al cielo* se conformó así en la metáfora de la concepción najeriana, llevada por el autor al mundo de la cosa pública, al de la moral social y, también, al de su propia profesión, la de escritor." (*Tradición y modernidad* 142).

Although *Por donde se sube al cielo* represents characters in French settings, the novel speaks directly to an elite Mexican audience. Extending Clark de Lara's trailblazing reading of this obscure work, I approach the novel as a position-taking in the debates concerning artistic activity in late nineteenth-century Mexico and its relationship with public morality and social progress.<sup>12</sup> Magda's story emits a profound desire for moral order in modern society, and, at the same time, problematizes the desire for material goods that accompanies the ascendant bourgeoisie.<sup>13</sup> Many ideas from Gutiérrez Nájera's essays directed to Mexico City's elite find their way into the novel, particularly his total rejection of materialism. The descriptions of cultural life and the movements of the characters within the novel represent a society with which the Mexican readers could relate, if not based on personal experience, at least based on idealistic aspirations for modernization. The real and symbolic distance between Mexico City and Paris allows the novel to examine these modernizing aspirations: what would Mexico City look like if it exactly imitated Paris? What elements of French modernity would be most beneficial for Mexico, and what problems or obstacles should be expected when these benefits appear? The

setting of the novel encourages readers to ponder these questions as they freely move between Mexico and France in a way that neither celebrates European superiority nor reifies American exceptionalism.

The tension between the immediate national politics and an idealized cosmopolitan poetics animates most of Gutiérrez Nájera's writing, especially his pleas for artistic liberty. In a well-known polemical essay written in 1876, "El arte y el materialismo," Gutiérrez Nájera argued that romantic poets were "los defensores del amor y la familia, de la sociedad y la patria, los mantenedores denodados de la belleza" (31). The preservation of artistic beauty is not a specifically Mexican national literary objective he argues, but neither is it a direct import from Europe. And resistance to materialism and realism allows patriotic ideas to flourish, opening spaces for poetic participation in the expression of national identity.<sup>14</sup> This Gutiérrez Nájera essay, one of the clearest expressions of his poetics, was published when he was 17 in *El Correo Germánico*. His passionate defense of lyricism and romanticism responded to an article signed by "P.T." in *El Monitor Republicano*, one of the most important periodicals of 1870s Mexico. "P.T.," Pantaleón Tovar, a well-known novelist of the 1860s and 1870s, represented for Gutiérrez Nájera an odious combination of materialist and positivist beliefs that elided the value of *poesía sentimental* and the expression of aesthetic and spiritual idealism. In response to P.T.'s attacks, Gutiérrez Nájera argued that materialism had corrupted poetry and that "debe dejarse en entera libertad al poeta para expresar sus sentimientos, ya sean religiosos, ya patrióticos o ya amorosos, en la forma que su inspiración le dicte" (10-11). Appealing to the liberal ideology of the 1870s, the adolescent poet repeated the word *libertad* many times in his impassioned defense of poets and poetry. Summoning liberalism to his side of the argument, El Duque Job stripped a powerful rhetorical support away from his adversary, linking his desire for a more universal

poetics with Mexico's specific political situation. Furthermore, he accuses Tovar of submitting to critical self-censorship that threatens to restrict the Porfirian writer's literary gaze. After making this rhetorical move, Gutiérrez Nájera goes on to chastise the materialists directly with strongly bellicose imagery:

Los hijos del arte, los que anhelamos alcanzar un nombre que legar a nuestra patria, los que sentimos una noble fiebre de la Gloria, los que vivimos con la vida del espíritu, no vamos a alistarnos en vuestras filas, y agrupándonos bajo la bandera del idealismo, serenos, tranquilos, con la certeza de alcanzar el triunfo, nos apercebimos a la lucha, dispuestos a morir, primero que a rendirnos. Es vuestro lema la negación de todo lo bueno, de todo lo bello. (30)

Moral and aesthetic value emerge from a common spiritual source for Gutiérrez Nájera, and the patriotic images of flags, armies, struggle, and sacrifice evoke the desperate pursuit of security, peace, and prosperity at the outset of the Porfiriato. Art and literature, however, take over where military power ends, providing society with the tools to inspire the nation with truth and beauty. Although the young poet does not explicitly raise the question of cosmopolitanism, numerous references to Spanish, French, and Italian writers reveal sympathy for a free exchange of artistic works and ideas between nations that challenges Altamirano's call for the cultivation of a strictly inward-looking Mexican literature.

Keeping an eye on Mexico's specific needs, Gutiérrez Nájera also cultivated a cosmopolitan aesthetic sensibility that threatened the nationalist hopes of many Mexican intellectuals. Without question, the register of the novel's language and content speaks to an implicit audience of elite readers familiar with theaters, salons, and leisure travel. The novel certainly would have been difficult to understand in an oral reading among the illiterate sectors

of Mexican society as sometimes occurred in the nineteenth-century; lengthy descriptions and narrations of interior monologues would be much more suitable for quiet, private reading than public recitation in a busy square or tavern. A popular interpretation of these reading habits emphasizes the derivative, European nature of metropolitan culture compared to the ostensibly “natural,” Mexican character of the countryside. Mílada Bazant advances this argument in her history of Porfirian reading practices: “El afrancesamiento cunde en una pequeña élite que vive en las ciudades y que goza imitando actitudes y gustos de la burguesía francesa. La mayor parte de los mexicanos, los que viven en las áreas rurales, se mantienen alejados de los influjos extranjeros y no comparten la nueva prosperidad porfiriana” (205). Although the production and circulation of works that expressed European influence and cultural references was isolated to a small audience of elite readers in Mexico City and other industrial centers, it does not necessarily follow that the cultural and social divisions that produced the relatively closed network of elite cultural exchange were undisturbed by the cultural products or unquestioned by writers and intellectuals. And not all readers of *Por donde se sube al cielo* were solipsistic landowners who distanced themselves from everyday Mexicans; many were part of the energetic political and intellectual elite whose ambitions centered on uniting their country to create a powerful economy strengthened by sound social and moral values.

The subscribing public of *El Noticioso*, the newspaper where the novel appeared, were almost certainly literate and part of the small audience of Mexican readers.<sup>15</sup> These individuals, most of them men, were likely accustomed to reading novels, poems, essays, and other literary works alongside political and social news. The Mexican press could not produce books like their European or American peers, but newspapers throughout the country dedicated space to theatrical and intellectual work (Monroy 762). Although literacy estimates from 1880 cannot be

calculated for the entire country, as late as 1895 only 14% of the population could read and write: 17% of the men and 11% of the women (González Navarro 532). The division between the reading public and the illiterate public was largely metropolitan-rural, leading to cultural fragmentation that threatened Mexican national identity. In many ways the rural/urban state of affairs was inherited from colonial Mexico, and modernization, embodied, as Bazant points out, in the locomotive, brought rural and urban communities into closer contact.

As the nineteenth century accelerated to an unknown conclusion, processes of modernization altered the patterns for literary production and consumption in Mexico. *Por donde se sube al cielo* represents these disruptions through the experiences of Magda, the young actress whose discontent and spiritual malaise in the face of romantic uncertainty propel her to reconsider her life choices. And even though the tensions in the novel do not explicitly criticize specific events or individuals in Mexican society they do indicate that the increasing influence of materialism was altering moral codes. Does Magda need to be saved from her opulent surroundings? Can she save herself? These enigmas, planted at the outset of the novel, arise from the singularity of Magda's position in society, a position that, due to its novelty, could not easily be interpreted by traditional expectations of behavior and values. As a result of the impotence of existing models, exploration and experimentation became the only option as Gutiérrez Nájera began to write the next pages in Mexico's national narrative.

The central conflict in the novel is typically romantic: a young woman finds herself torn between two lovers. The intense purity of Raúl's affections causes Magda to reflect on her romantic past, producing a sense of despair that disrupts her relationship with Carlos Provot.<sup>16</sup> As the readers follow Magda's internal monologues, memories and dreams, Provot becomes a stand-in for bourgeois life and Raúl becomes the stereotypical romantic youth, the epitome of

genuine and pure devotion. Although the allegorical love triangle sets the stage for a moralizing resolution, the novel does not culminate in a productive pairing; instead, readers are left with the image of Magda sitting alone at her dressing table, thoughtfully sorting her jewelry in an exercise of self-discovery and renewal overshadowed by lingering doubts about her future.

Compared to Magda's inner turmoil, her relationships with Raúl and Provot appear relatively stunted. Descriptions of Magda reveal that her psychological and social condition are unstable and that contradictions are pulling her apart. In her pursuit of love and attention, she acquires wealth and comfort, but inner tranquility remains elusive. Though this tension occasionally appears in Magda's interactions with other characters, it mostly becomes apparent in the descriptions and comments that the narrator directs to his audience of implied readers.

Desire in *Por donde se sube al cielo* is powerful, but also dangerous. When Magda returns home after an evening singing in the theater, the narrator admires the expensive clothing and opulent objects that fill her *boudoir*. Scanning her inner sanctum, the narrator's gaze alights on a birdcage, a piano, and other antique furniture; descriptions of material wealth communicate a sense of fascination with Magda's success in the theater, but, at the same time, a tone of uneasiness covers the scene with a light touch of anxiety and dread. After describing the "flores ajadas de los sombreros a la moda" and the "vestidos de damasco rameado" that are littered throughout the apartment, the narrator turns to the protagonist as she exhaustedly submits herself to "la sabrosa somnolencia en que viven y mueren las sultanas" (12). The intoxication of Magda's luxurious environment produces an enigmatic characterization at the outset of her story that corresponds to competing interpretations of the accumulation of wealth. She is at once successful and doomed.



The blend of description and commentary in the narrative links moral and spiritual questions with the style of the text. This technique allows the novel to speak to the implied reader's experience of the world without depending excessively on mimesis or other realist techniques. In the description of Magda's beautiful apartment, for example, the appraisal of her furnishings connotes vitality as well as decadence; the rich detail of the scene produces admiration for Magda's success, but the narrator's critical interventions and judgments bring the description into dialog with the social and aesthetic expectations of the implied readers. In this way the narrator brings the luxurious imagery into contact with the reading public's social world. Alongside the narrator, and alongside Magda, readers become aware of the way that their moral and aesthetic beliefs shape their social interactions.

Realist narrative techniques cannot adequately resolve Magda's dilemma because they are unable to capture her desire to change course away from the determining weight of her past experiences. Turning to the story of Magda's upbringing and her familial past, the narrator encounters the origins of her current situation, but no certainty regarding their eventual solution, whether positive or negative. When the readers glimpse moments of Magda's adolescence in a boarding school shortly before her mother's death, the narrator uses these memories to segue into explicit moralizing about the role of religion. "La religión, únicamente, pudiera haber salvado a aquella ánima," the narrator explains, introducing the traditional notions of purity and chastity that guide the development of Magda's relationships with Raúl and Provot in the rest of the novel (19-20). Staging Magda's salvation as the central problem and theme of the novel, the narrator concludes his presentation of Magda's struggle to live "appropriately" with an ominous indictment of the young actress: "Magda, pues, vivía indefensa. Las inclinaciones heredadas y las costumbres contraídas la empujaban al abismo" (20). The threat of falling into the abyss (of

eternal damnation) motivates the narration, as does the hope that she will be able to find her way again. Both potential outcomes have roots in Magda's past, so the outcome must be determined by her thoughts and actions in the present. Will Magda be able to escape her feelings of torment? Realism can only describe her present situation, as it related to known events in the past; in order to plot a new path, her story must find a different solution.

The spectacle of the theater and the exploitation of beauty for profit are the most obvious points of departure for the novel's critique of Magda's social position. The Parisian nightlife and theatrical world in which Magda lives was one model of modern culture that Porfirian elites emulated in Mexico. Gutiérrez Nájera especially believed that the French ideas and practices rested at the pinnacle of civilization and were the most worthy of incorporation in Mexican culture. In many ways, the theater was a contentious site of cultural production where social codes of morality were consistently challenged, both on stage and off. In Mexico City, European plays, operas, and musical acts drew attendance and attention from the prosperous classes of Mexico City who emulated elites in the Americas and in Europe.<sup>17</sup> Gutiérrez Nájera was an influential figure in Mexico City's theatrical scene who demonstrated an acute sensitivity for moral corruption in the culture of the theater. His sensibilities certainly informed the representation of Magda's position in the novel; they also likely evoked intertextual connections for readers who were familiar with his theatrical reviews.<sup>18</sup> Gutiérrez Nájera's descriptions and criticisms of operatic, dramatic, and comic spectacles colored Mexico City's nightlife with a distinctly European palette. Extraordinary numbers of traveling performers and companies visited Mexico City during the Porfiriato, and Gutiérrez Nájera's acute tastes and preferences shaped public opinion of these spectacles in the pages of dozens of periodicals. He generally avoided popular performances, preferring works that, in his view, would edify moral value as

well as educate the audience (J. L. Martínez 37). He especially lamented the ostentatiousness of the theater and the corrupting influence of the visual pleasures of the theatrical space on the theater-going public.<sup>19</sup>

Keeping El Duque Job's theatrical criticism in mind, the symbolic association between Magda and the theater evokes the cosmopolitan networks of Mexico's theatrical scene. At the same time, her professional role as an actress raises questions about the relationship between her conduct and the expectations of the audience. On stage Magda exchanges her bodily presence for the audience's approval. The commodification of Magda's body generates ticket sales, but, as the narrator makes clear, it also corrodes her self-esteem and cheapens her relationships with others. In his description of the theater from which Magda emerges at the outset of the novel, the narrator bluntly asserts that: "Cuando se quiere hacer de la belleza un negocio por acciones, el mercado mejor es el teatro" (21-22).<sup>20</sup> A symbolic relationship forms between Magda and the marketplace when, as she leaves the theater, she stops by the manager's office and emerges with a package of coins. When she returns home, she flings the package onto a couch and the coins scatter around the room, falling under the piano and rolling into the curtains. As these coins fill the corners of the room, the space comes to represent the economic exchange value of Magda's beauty in the theatrical market. As a result, one of the central enigmas of the novel is set: the theater clearly allows Magda to live comfortably and independently, yet it also reduces the value of her surroundings, and perhaps even her self, to a discrete amount of money.

The narrative emphasizes Magda's ignorance of her problematic position in order to push her toward resolution through a process of self-discovery and introspection. She is the only agent capable of resolving the moral dilemma posed by the commodification of her beauty. At the outset of the trip to Aguas Claras, Magda and Provot appear to understand their romantic

attachment; yet when Magda hears about Raúl's affectionate interest, her attempts to detach herself from Provot incite a shocking outburst that emphasizes the economic, rather than romantic, nature of their relationship. Provot shouts at Magda: "Hoy, aún eres mía, me perteneces como una cosa que he comprado. Puedo escupirte, pisotearte, arañar ese cutis y estrujar los encajes de tu bata. ¿Quieres ser libre? ¡Págame! Si yo te debo, ¡toma!" (51). Flinging a handful of coins in her face, he leaves her on the floor where she begins to sob. Provot's cruelty in this scene, expressed with transactional connotations, reveals how modern romantic relationships can commodify and dehumanize women. Unsurprisingly, after confronting Provot Magda tries to shift her romantic desire to prepare to accept Raúl. She knows that in Raúl's eyes she is chaste and pure, so she desires to feel the same way about herself (71). The difference between Provot and Raúl rests on the principle of economic exchange; Magda desperately yearns for freedom from the strictures of her bodily commodification, leading her to abandon Provot and strive toward purification that can make her worthy of Raúl's love. By the end of the novel, Magda recognizes that she must surrender the lavish furniture, jewels, and dresses collected in the apartment in order to free herself from the commodification of her past and purify her spirit. As she looks around her, literally and figuratively, she feels that these goods accuse her of past misdeeds and that "Aquellos muebles habían sido comprados a precio de la honra" (121). Her path to purity emerges from this realization, and, she immediately begins to extract her body and spirit from the marketplaces in which they were exploited.

The commodification of Magda's beauty evokes the bourgeois materialism that had worried Gutiérrez Nájera in his essays and reviews in the Mexico City press. But since materialism is the source of the young actress's discontent, the author needed to utilize non-materialist strategies to resolve her dilemmas. This would mean rejecting a materialist worldview

and directly challenging the influential group of Mexican positivists who believed that observations of the physical world would yield knowledge about human nature. But Gutiérrez Nájera believed that art and aesthetic value could transform the material world, endorsing an idealist philosophy that evoked a Platonic relationship between the real and spiritual worlds. He passionately argued in “El arte y el materialismo” that:

Lo que nosotros combatimos y combatiremos siempre, es esa *materialización* del arte, ese asqueroso y repugnante positivismo que en mal hora pretende introducir en la poesía; ese cartabón ridículo a que se pretende someter a todos los poetas, privándoles así de la libertad; cartabón que excluye como inútiles o maléficos a todos los géneros sentimentales, y que sólo acepta al mal llamado género realista. (“El arte”<sup>12</sup>)

These words, directed at Tovar and other popular liberal authors of the 1870s, prefigured the approach adopted by the dramatized writer in *Por donde se sube al cielo*. Magda’s desire for spiritual purification leads her to reorganize her private space by removing the most luxurious items that she had attained through her work in the theater. She hopes that by selling furniture and discarding gaudy jewelry that she will be able to create harmony between her surroundings and her self-perception. The mirrors that fill the space reinforce this representation of a Platonic relationship between the real and ideal worlds. While materialists would emphasize the impact that her surroundings have on her thought, the novel represents the opposite process, the use of internal thoughts and feelings to guide interactions with the material world. The inability of materialism to chart Magda’s future is captured in the final moments of the narrative, as both the humble thimble and the bright bracelets call out to Magda from her jewelry box. Since both materials are available to Magda, the forces that guide Magda to choose between them cannot be

merely material but extend deep into her subjective experience and her understanding of spiritual idealism.

For Gutiérrez Nájera, artistic realism and materialism threatened the vitality of beauty and virtue. He wrote in his response to Tovar that “En nuestra patria, aquí donde se rinde culto a todo lo bello y a todo lo grande, jamás podrá imperar la escuela realista, hija enfermiza de la prostituida Europa, nacida entre la embriaguez y la orgia” (29). In *Por donde se sube al cielo* literary realism, and even sociologically-minded naturalism, appear to be in tension with descriptions of aesthetic beauty and moral purity. When describing Magda’s fragmented relationships with her mother, the narrator juxtaposes physical and spiritual determinism: “Quitad al niño algún sentido desde el primer minuto de su vida, pues le habéis quitado todo un orden de ideas en el entendimiento. Quitadle el santo amparo de la madre, pues le habéis quitado todo un linaje de virtudes en el corazón” (56). Physical determinism has no place in the novel, at least not independently from the ethereal belief in salvation and purification, as the narrative voice asserts with a literary simile: “En todo espíritu, aún en el más gastado, puede encontrarse una virginidad. Cada alma es como un libro que no tiene todas las páginas abiertas” (57). Consistently returning the narrative to the question of salvation, Gutiérrez Nájera explicitly rejects narrative materialism and determinism.

In place of these inadequate philosophical and narrative paradigms, the novel employs traditional Catholic images and narratives in order to illuminate Magda’s position and offer her opportunities for salvation and purification. For even the most secular readers the Christian story of redemption would be difficult to ignore in Magda’s story. “Sufrir es elevarse,” explains the narrative voice as Magda begins to separate herself from Provot: “por eso Dios ha puesto su eternal bienaventuranza al término de una vía dolorosa” (55). Christianity was a powerful moral

voice in Mexican literature throughout the nineteenth century, beginning with *El Periquillo Sarniento* and the picaresque message about right-living and civic obedience. Although skeptical of the Catholic Church and the clergy, Mexican writers and intellectuals often relied on Christian moral teachings in order to critique political or social deformations.<sup>21</sup> The images associated with Magda's anguished reflections about her amorous past echo Biblical stories of prostitutes, and scenes set in both Aguas Claras and Paris evoke baptismal symbolism. When Magda sits on the beach at Aguas Claras, the sea beckons powerfully, inspiring thoughts of drowning. The narrative indulges these suicidal notions, as Magda begins to dialogue with voices that she hears arising from the ocean. "La muerte lava y purifica todo" she thinks to herself, contemplating the temperature of the water and the ways in which her body would be disfigured in the waves (66). Christian imagery reiterates Magda's desire for purification; it also offers her character freedom from the deterministic assumptions of realist materialism.

Through dreams and memories Magda, like the mystic poets of Early Modern Spain and Spanish America, enters a deeply subjective space detached from the physical world where she can search for a cathartic release of her anxiety. Struggling to accept Raúl's love and desperate to free herself from Provot, her need for a radical act of purification produces an intense and feverish dream that sharply departs from the more realist descriptions and tone of the rest of the novel. After a narrative ellipsis between Magda's departure from Aguas Claras and her arrival in Paris, the narrative voice returns to the tormented actress's apartment and finds her hallucinating through tears of exhaustion and grief. The relationship between the furnishings of the space and Magda's spirit blurs when the narrative voice explains that she "sollozaba viendo con los ojos, desmesuradamente abiertos, esas cosas que no estaban afuera, sino dentro de ella" (108). The inversion of Magda's gaze toward introspection introduces a horrifying dream in which she

experiences a flood in the midst of her metropolitan surroundings. As the water rises, it blacks out the streetlamps, covers balconies, and forces Magda to climb to the roof, where dozens of cats scratch at her face. After escaping into a small boat lit by a single candle, she despairs as she begins to sink and resigns herself to dying in the waves. Before she can lose consciousness, however, she brushes against a stone cross at the pinnacle of a church tower, and as she clings to the structure, the water begins to recede. Struck with vertigo, she looks down at the city and has an epiphany: “La vida bullía abajo, y esa vida en que iba a precipitarse fatalmente era para ella el seno de la muerte” (111). But, before she can find a way to get down from the tower, a crow descends from the sky and pecks out Magda’s eyes, causing her to fall to her death, and awaken from the dream.

The images that accumulate in Magda’s dream symbolically describe her tortured feelings, and it is through the symbolic exploration and experience of these pressures, rather than through lived, sensory experience, that Magda recognizes the source of her discontent. Her epiphany as she stares down at a damp city comes from her embrace of Christian morals that to her feel strong and safe; the rising water slowly and silently endangers Magda, as did the Parisian nightlife when she naively entered the theater; the light in the boat is an unexpected respite, much like Raúl’s love, yet even the purity of his intentions is not strong enough to rescue her entirely. After describing these relationships and problems in other parts of the narrative, readers may ask why the narrator would bother to insert this scene? Most importantly, the dream rejects a material interpretation of Magda’s condition: the problem is not outside of her, it is internal and essentially subjective. After awaking from her dream and recovering from her fever Magda begins to change her habits and think about her life in a new way. The narrative voice



celebrates this transformation and explains that “La verdad es que Magda quería despedazar los férreos eslabones de esa cadena que la ataba a su pasado” (120).

Mentally breaking the chains of the past is a powerful symbol of de-materialization, one in which the individual overcomes the determining forces of her social environment. Employing traditional Catholic spiritual imagery to guide Magda away from her modern life in the theater is a somewhat ironic strategy that frees Magda from one system of authority and inserts her into another. Catholic spirituality appears in *Por donde se sube cielo* as a “residual cultural element” in Porfirian culture, to use an element of Raymond Williams’s Marxist interpretation of cultural development. According to Williams, dominant cultural systems are best understood through the analysis of interrelations between various kinds of cultural forms. Residual forms are recognizably products of the past which still contribute to the dominant culture, as Williams explains: “Certain experiences, meanings, and values which cannot be expressed or substantially verified in terms of the dominant culture, are nevertheless lived and practised on the basis of the residue—cultural as well as social—of some previous social and cultural institution or formation” (122). Given that the liberal Constitution of 1857 remarkably diminished the dominance of the Catholic church in Mexican law and politics, Gutiérrez Nájera’s novel suggests that the church still maintained residual power in the 1870s and 1880s. Though many aspects of Catholic morality were incorporated into Mexican liberalism, making them ‘archaic’ in William’s classification, residual power persisted in the mystical relationships between the human and the divine. In other words, Magda’s escape from materialism emerges from a spiritual experience that provides her the distance necessary to alter her behavior.

Read against the narrative challenge to realism in *Por donde se sube al cielo*, the process of critically viewing present circumstances, connecting them with past deeds, and then

interpreting these relationships through a moral paradigm reinforces the critical role that literature can play in the formation of individual free will. What literary works were most apt to this task for society was at the heart of literary debates at the end of the nineteenth century, because, as Williams's model explains, the incorporation of residual cultural elements is a product of "the work of selective tradition," which in literature, often seeks to define what literature is and can be (123). Whether or not to celebrate European literary achievement divided Mexico's literary circles during the Porfiriato, and the role of positivist materialism split more scientifically-minded liberals from their spiritualist brethren.<sup>22</sup> In these arguments appeals to the past supported claims that certain criteria would be more suited than others to guide the formation of the Mexican literary canon as well as guide the Mexico toward modernity. The control of the selective tradition was not formally located within the Díaz regime or within the state, but rather within the public debates between the writers and intellectuals who all competed for the state's favor. By 1882, a remarkable consensus had formed regarding the need for peace and order in Mexico, but Gutiérrez Nájera threatened the dominant nationalist order that was favored by Ignacio Altamirano and his disciples by incorporating Catholic spirituality and European taste into *Por donde se sube al cielo*. Even as he reaffirmed the perception that intellectuals occupied a privileged ideological position in Mexico after the French Intervention, El Duque Job also altered the discourses on which they depended. Unlike Altamirano, Gutiérrez Nájera was too young to fight on the side of Juárez or to publish fiercely nationalist essays during the war; rather, he, like other young men who began to enter the intellectual circles of Mexico City in the 1870s and 1880s, observed the conflict from his library window and in the newspapers sent to his father. This generation of young writers exploited reading, writing, learning, and taste in the pursuit of power and influence. Like the writer staring out his window

at the rain in the dedication of *Por donde se sube al cielo*, these men were fixated on what the future would bring as a result of their artistic interventions.

Metaliterary images in the novel connect moral action with literary taste and reading practices. Literary consumption habits are both extensions of social standing and reflections of moral purity. Reading is a regular and vital activity in Magda's life. Her upper-class trappings and familiarity with novels and the theater prompt inquisition from her peers at the boarding school, and on her bedside table rests a novel with uncut pages, described by the narrator as still "virgin" (15-18). In addition to signaling Magda's material wealth, the image of the book connotatively develops a contrast with Magda's sexuality, creating a link between reading and morality that reinforces the relevance of *Por donde se sube al cielo* for its public of implied readers. The association between reading and sex further develops when Magda calls to mind memories of a classmate who died during their time together in school. When the girl's corpse had been discovered and removed, her peers found a novel tucked into a hole in her mattress, one "cuyas primeras líneas no podría leer una mujer casada." (17). After thinking about this discovery, Magda looks for a mirror that she has hidden in her own bed, forming a syntagmatic relationship between the mirror and the novel that associates the experiences of the two young women. The relationship between reader and novel, then, is a moral one, in addition to the more explicitly cultural meanings concerning taste that literary consumption implied in nineteenth-century society. When the matronly mother of Raúl and Eugenia remarks to Provot that "Las niñas no deben leer novelas, con exclusión de aquellas que haya aprobado el arzobispo," he shrugs her off (62). The question of censorship and taste is raised but not answered. Like the Mexican intellectual class that was debating the criteria of the works to be included in the selective tradition of Mexican literature, the criteria that dictated which works were most

appropriate for women was obviously an issue. Although *Por donde se sube* does not offer a specific contribution to this debate, it does argue to the reading public—both during the Porfiriato and to readers over a hundred years later—that aesthetic taste and moral behavior are inextricably linked.

From a twenty-first century standpoint, the representation of Magda's social problems clearly limits her role in public and intellectual life. This remarkably conservative position should not be surprising in a novel from the Porfiriato, particularly from Gutiérrez Nájera, who unironically observed in 1882 that the woman's influence "is enclosed by the four walls of the home" (*Obras* 14, 114). In response to a social environment in which a woman is free to move through the city unaccompanied, the novel pushes her toward the closed spaces of traditional femininity. Even though her position in the theater allows her to interact with powerful politicians, intellectuals, and playwrights, her spiritual epiphany encourages her to turn her back on this work and take up manual labor. Though the novel challenges some cultural practices and expectations, it leaves others, like gender roles, largely intact. Jean Franco has argued that nineteenth-century Mexican fiction limited female protagonism to the domestic sphere through a binary symbolism: purity/corruption. In this Porfirian view, Franco explains, women in the home could be protected from the problems on the street. In her reading of two of Gutiérrez Nájera's short prose works, Franco concludes that *modernista* narrative style "incorporated taste into the beautiful but reserved the scopic and evaluative glance for the male"; in other words, even when women represented moral and aesthetic ideals, they did not have the ability to comment on those same ideals in the public sphere (97-98).

Magda's voice calls from the novel to the writer, but when all is said and done, it is the writer's voice, and not his protagonist's, that speaks to the audience of implied readers. As

Magda tries to resolve her anxieties, she becomes objectified within the narrator's gaze. The preoccupation with Magda's salvation reveals the narrator's impulse to fill the cracks in the moral and aesthetic order. Without the threat of corruption, there would be no need for the novel and the protagonist would not need to cry for her story to be heard. Her objectification, then, becomes a natural consequence of the establishment of the narrator's authority. González, citing insights from Nina Auerbach, argues that this is typical of nineteenth century literature: "la lucha por el estilo se representa como el intento de someter a una mujer particularmente rebelde, o 'histórica', a la legalidad de un discurso ordenador que 'interpreta' a la mujer, procurando de este modo 'arrancarle su secreto'" (*La novela* 58). In the case of *Por donde se sube al cielo*, the "organizing discourse" is the discourse of the dramatized writer, the intellectual whose moral and aesthetic insights emerge from his idealism and cosmopolitanism.

One example of this threat to the social order can be seen in representations of same-sex desire in the novel. Magda's physical beauty, adorned with Parisian dresses and accessories, attracts attention from almost everyone she meets, even from another woman. Though the brief moments of description and characterization in the novel do not suggest that any woman in the narrative adopts a lesbian identity, eroticism does linger at the margins of several of Magda's relationships. At the beach spa, Eugenia cannot keep her eyes off of the new arrival and imagines her life in the French aristocracy. As Magda and the other characters gathered at Aguas Claras sit together, Eugenia stares at the Parisian beauty: "Eugenia, absorta únicamente en la contemplación de Magda, apenas se atrevió a entreabrir sus rojos labios, parecidos a una cereza cortada en dos por el agudo pico de los pájaros" (34). Eugenia's fascinated gaze appears here juxtaposed with the narrative voice's mildly erotic description of her own cherry-red lips, subtly increasing the sexual and romantic tension of the narrative. Raúl and Provot, Magda's male

suitors, appear to be awkwardly detached from Magda in this scene as Magda and Eugenia establish an ambiguously sexualized bond. When Eugenia reveals to Magda that Raúl is in love with her, she rejects Magda's self-deprecating assertion that she is a "desgraciada." Eugenia responds with a gender-bending expression of desire: "¿Desgraciada? ¿y por qué? Rica y hermosa... ¿no vives en París?, ¿no tienes carruajes, vestidos, palco en el teatro? ¡Sí dan tentaciones de ser hombre para enamorarte!" (44). Admittedly, Eugenia seems at this moment to be more interested in Magda's position in the Parisian social scene than she is in Magda's sexualized body, yet the idea of changing into a man in order to woo another woman is a very suggestive and provocative proposal.

Throughout the nineteenth century in Mexico, compulsive heterosexuality controlled by the Church and the State depended on rigid systems of morality, purity, and chastity among men. Same-sex desire threatened these codes. Robert McKee Irwin has explored the impact of same-sex relationships on the formation of Mexican national identity after Independence, and has argued that during the 1850s and 60s Mexico's national integration was an almost exclusively male homosocial project, "despite the popularity of romantic novels and an almost paranoiac concern about heterosexual relations" (47). This paranoia sought to protect the power of the Church and the liberal State, but it logically had a limiting effect on women. When, as a result of processes of modernization, women began to leave their homes to work or travel, as occurs in *Por donde se sube al cielo*, their public interactions openly challenged moral codes that had traditionally restricted them to domesticity.

The Catholic narrative of spiritual salvation in *Por donde se sube al cielo* contributes to restrictive solution that paradoxically appears to satisfy Magda's desire for purity and inner peace. Magda's freedom to move about the city at all hours of the day and night at the outset of

the novel is noticeably restricted by the time the story approaches its conclusion. Porfirian readers likely would have been skeptical about the propriety of her independence, which may be the reason why the narrator is so fixated on inserting her into a Christian story of purification. Magda's cries seem to provoke sympathy from the dramatized writer, but the novel resolves Magda's dilemma in a contradictory manner: in order to achieve freedom from the materialism around her, she must seek refuge in a more confined and limited domestic space. In the closing scene, this contradiction reveals a dilemma regarding Magda's freedom and her relationship to work and economic markets. As the young actress reviews the contents of her jewelry box, she pulls out a small gold thimble, the only item that does not inspire self-accusatory thoughts. She hears the "pobre joya" call out to her and say, "Yo soy la felicidad y la virtud, soy el trabajo" (122). The jewels surrounding the thimble, however, are also associated with work, only that work was on the public stages of Paris. The narrative explicitly rejects the commodification of Magda's body, but it also ties her to domesticity.

Gutiérrez Nájera's denunciation of materialism explicitly challenged the realism associated with positivism and the erosion of idealism in the Mexican literary marketplace; and it also applied to the corrosive effects of bourgeois values on artistic taste. The critique of the bourgeoisie appears in a surprising narrative aside that has no immediate or obvious relationship with the plot, characters, or narration of Magda's story of redemption. The "Paréntesis" that appeared in *El Noticioso* under the header of *Por donde se sube al cielo* introduces a new set of characters and a new narrative problem that, at first glance, appear to have nothing in common with the rest of the novel. With more careful scrutiny, however, the inclusion of the "Paréntesis" allows the implied author of the novel—distinct from the narrator of Magda's story, though

perhaps coterminous with the dramatized writer in the dedication—to interrogate a problem related to materialism that does not directly relate to Magda’s circumstances.

*Por donde se sube al cielo* is a serial novel, so the author had the opportunity to develop the work in fits and starts; recognizing that uneven tone and characterization often appear in the novel as a result, the “Paréntesis” challenges the narrative unity of the text. None of the characters from Magda’s story appear in the “Paréntesis,” which is why the chapter begins with a new narrative frame: a monologue *in media res* introduces a young man who melancholically reminisces the circumstances that led to his engagement and marriage. The romantic tone of Magda’s affections with Raul quickly fall away as a new intradiegetic narrator laments his relationship with his wife, whom he met when she was clearing the crumbs off of the table with a brush at a dinner party. Clark de Lara has hypothesized that Gutiérrez Nájera probably had not yet completed the next section of Magda’s story, and so he sent the “Paréntesis” to *El Noticioso* instead.<sup>23</sup> Bracketing the specific motivations of the author, the insertion of the story of a disillusioned bohemian into Magda’s story reveals a certain desperation on behalf of the author to respond to the social and aesthetic problems that he observed in Mexico City at the outset of the Porfiriato. The thematic development produced by the “Paréntesis” and the narrative interruption that it causes are inseparable; the disruption allows *Por donde se sube al cielo* to address the social, moral, and aesthetic problems raised in the text in different ways. The narrative voice moves freely in order to develop the ideas of the novel without having to isolate them within a single group of characters. The novel’s structure leads the reading public to recognize that the aside and Magda’s story share common concerns and themes, especially a preoccupation with transformations in the social landscape and the resulting shifts in moral and aesthetic values.



The “Paréntesis” is, above all, a stinging critical representation of the materialization of art in the artistic taste of the emerging bourgeoisie. The brief attraction that led to marriage pulled the young man out of his apartment and placed him into a bourgeois home. The narrator’s old apartment, located on the *Calle de Asas* (the Rue d’Assas in the 6<sup>th</sup> arrondissement of Paris) is obviously the young man’s sanctuary, as he explains to his unnamed interlocutors: “Allí tenía yo mi flauta, mi pipa, una buena alfombra, un gran sillón de respaldo tendido, muy cómodo para soñar y para leer a un lado del fuego” (75). His marriage, however, disrupts the calm and contemplative life that he enjoyed with his books and music; even his paintings are left behind, replaced by gifts from Señor Dubu, his father-in-law: “Hace mucho tiempo que mis galantes y amables grabados [...] fueron relegados como indecentes a un corredor negro, y fúnebres imágenes [...], regalo de mi suegro [...], entristecen en marcos escandalosos las paredes de mi habitación” (80).<sup>24</sup> The narrator associates the hideousness of the paintings with his marriage, blaming Dubu for corrupting the bohemian peace that had been enjoyed on the Calle de Assas. The father-in-law, who the narrator describes as “an odious bourgeois man, a domestic tyrant” produces a heavy depression for the young man; bourgeois taste tortures the narrator even in his dreams (79). The monologue concludes as the narrator exclaims “That’s all there is to my life!” disquieted with a nostalgic longing for the life that he could have led. The juxtaposition of artistic taste and social standing in the “Paréntesis” demonstrates that financial success does not *ipso facto* produce moral or aesthetic sensitivities. For the disillusioned newlywed, entrance into the bourgeoisie leads him to despair; the hideous art on the walls even makes him dream about decapitating his wife. The young narrator’s experience reinforces the conclusion of Magda’s story: wealth will, more often than not, produce spiritual discontent and the loss of self.

Skepticism about the positive effects of marriage also ties the “Paréntesis” to the rest of *Por donde se sube al cielo*. The young narrator and Magda experience romance in radically different ways. As Magda hopes to find redemption through a relationship with the stoic Raúl, marriage appears to be the mechanism of her salvation. The young narrator’s romantic attachment, on the other hand, corrupts his personal sanctuary of art and beauty. Why do these protagonists have such different experiences? Gender may be one explanation: young women in the late-nineteenth century were still expected to marry and, as a result, single women threatened the social order erected upon these expectations. Another explanation is that the young man created a meaningful balance between work and leisure. Although he described his apartment as “a poor man’s room,” it was also a comfortable space for the cultivation and maintenance of artistic taste (75).<sup>25</sup> The inner peace of the young narrator makes him a foil for a Magda, questioning whether she will be able to attain redemption through marriage. Perhaps she should look to a nostalgic vision of the past, or try to find her own personal space in which music and art nurture her soul? As the reading public sees throughout the novel, Magda adopts both strategies: she submits to a traditional, Catholic model of purity and tries to make her personal space reflect her new values and priorities, disposing of the ostentatious products from her theatrical life.

Within *Por donde se sube al cielo* Magda and the young narrator of the “Paréntesis” tell their stories independently; both characters share a present moment in which artistic and moral ideals have been corrupted. The young narrator’s negative experience of monogamous heterosexual attraction and the materialization of art informs the reading of Magda’s anxious search for salvation, and vice versa. Either story could be read in order to explore the criticisms of bourgeois materialism or the pressure to marry in Mexico in the late nineteenth-century, but

their arrangement within *Por donde se sube al cielo* illuminates shared circumstances through juxtaposition. The common elements that connect the stories amplify the urgency of the characters' shared plea for solutions to problems that emerge from changing social and cultural practices in the modern age. The disruption of Magda's story may have been a question of historical circumstance for Gutiérrez Nájera, but even that disruption becomes meaningful in a text that interrogates the breaches in the moral and aesthetic order of late-nineteenth century Mexican society.

Turning to the role of the intellectual in *Por donde se sube al cielo*, the "Paréntesis" represents the *modernista* intellectual as an autonomous figure who strategically pursues aesthetic ideals in order to counteract the corrupting influence of bourgeois taste. Autonomy allows the *modernista* intellectual to protect himself from corrupt social transformations. Leading by example, he produces new ideas as a result of his contemplative isolation. Clark de Lara has argued that the "Paréntesis" should be read allegorically as a representation of the intellectual in late nineteenth-century Mexico. Her interpretation follows the analysis of the intellectual in Spanish American *modernismo* developed by Aníbal González, and she argues that "El 'Paréntesis' najeriano encierra esa sensación de malestar vital en un ser sensible a las artes, y que se opone y rechaza al mundo materialista" ("Introducción" cxxxviii). The young narrator does evoke the image of the *intelectual* described by González in his reading of José Martí's *Amistad Funesta*. He possesses "Ese recelo, esa desconfianza, profundamente irónica, de todo lo que aparenta ser ordenado y sencillo de interpretar, [que] es uno de los rasgos distintivos del intelectual moderno" (80). The skeptical treatment of bourgeois values reifies his independent cultivation of aesthetic taste.

The representation of an independent artistic spirit in the “Paréntesis” also points back to the dramatized writer in the dedication of *Por donde se sube al cielo* and the power of the writer to weather the storm through dedication to his literary and aesthetic ideals. The dramatized writer is protected from the thunderstorm outside his window, and in the warmth and comfort of his study he is free to hypothesize about the future. Noé Jitrik has argued that Spanish American *modernista* writers adopted an isolated social position in order to more effectively influence social and aesthetic values: “El intelectual, como nos lo presenta el modernismo, quiere ser otro aunque está todavía rodeado de los poderes que caracterizan una cultura en declinación” (113). Gutiérrez Nájera cultivated cultural independence through his diffuse publications and the use of pseudonyms; eventually the foundation of the influential *Revista Azul* created a new institutional space from which El Duque Job and like-minded intellectuals could direct social and aesthetic norms.

The story of spiritual salvation from material corruption becomes part of the discourse of authorship through the dramatization of the writer in the novel’s dedication. The image of the writer pacing in his study, considering the future of his published work, in addition to the narrator’s editorial comments, demonstrates that the writer’s role is very active in the creation of moral and aesthetic narratives. The position staked out by the narrator perpetuates an attitude of pedantic superiority that can be found throughout nineteenth-century Mexican literature, as Carlos Monsiváis has observed: “En última instancia, como José Joaquín Fernández de Lizardi, Ignacio Manuel Altamirano, Ignacio Ramírez y Justo Sierra, Gutiérrez Nájera se apegan a un dogma: la forja del público (lector o teatral) edifica a la nación civilizada” (36). Jorge Von Ziegler agrees with Monsiváis, arguing that Gutiérrez Nájera “no tiene los ojos puestos en un mundo nuevo sino en el pasado inmediato. No rompe con la estética anterior sino la revisa y, al

hacerlo, la afina y la lleva por otros cauces, no siempre revolucionarios” (143). The agreement between Gutiérrez Nájera and Altamirano on the socially and morally edifying role of literary activity supported institutions and practices that had been incrementally developed throughout the nineteenth century.

But at the same time, I have shown that El Duque Job also altered literary practices in Mexico through his acceptance of European literary models within his vision of the development of Mexican literature. A cliché judgment of Gutiérrez Nájera’s writing, popular among Mexican critics before and after his death, is that it expresses *afrancesamiento*, or too much French influence. Although French authors and culture forms appear throughout the Mexican poet’s corpus, and clearly in *Por donde se sube al cielo*, they do not overly determine the distinct form in which Gutiérrez Nájera represented literature or national culture. There is no direct derivation of a French literary mold; Boyd G. Carter documented hundreds of works by El Duque Job and argued against the *afrancesamiento* interpretation by indicating that Gutiérrez Nájera also criticized French authors and frequently celebrated the contributions of German, Spanish, and English writers (75-76).

Gutiérrez Nájera regularly expressed a desire to see Mexico participate in an international community and resisted the impulse to establish a national literature based on regional differences in language, geography, and custom. In an oft-cited newspaper essay in 1885, Gutiérrez Nájera criticized the nationalist literary project framed by Francisco Pimentel and other members of the Liceo Hidalgo. Even though Gutiérrez Nájera and Pimentel shared a concern for the development of an intellectual class, and both men believed that artistic and moral values were related, they disagreed sharply on the relationship between art and reality. Pimentel advocated a materialist approach to art. In a sweeping history of Mexican poetry published in

1883, Pimentel laid out this position and argued that “El verdadero artista no imita servilmente la naturaleza; pero sí busca en ella sus inspiraciones” (27). From this premise, he encouraged Mexican poets to avoid imitating European models and to begin to develop a uniquely Mexican national literature based on regional geography, tradition, and language: “el arte debe abarcar no solo las leyes necesarias de lo bello, sino el carácter de civilización en que nace, esto es, lo estable y lo pasajero” (719). Gutiérrez Nájera challenged Pimentel’s definition of national literature in 1885, contradicting the relevance of geography and language to the formation of literature. In place of Pimentel’s view of the literary development, Gutiérrez Nájera argued that Mexican writers should insert themselves more concertedly into an international community of intellectuals. His conclusion merits a lengthy quotation:

Las literaturas no se forman al antojo de nadie. Aparecen en los pueblos, cuando éstos llegan a cierto grado de desarrollo, como la curva de los senos se acentúa en la mujer, cuando ésta llega a la pubertad. La libertad, por consiguiente, es un hecho. Ahora bien, para que esta literatura tenga un carácter propio, se necesita que los literatos cuyas obras la compongan, estén dotados de poderosa individualidad. [...] Una literatura propia no es, en resumen, más que la suma de muchas poderosas individualidades. Poco importa que éstas hayan contribuido al fondo común de la literatura con obras en que se pinten otros países o se canten proezas de héroes extraños. (*Obras* 1, 86-87)

Gutiérrez Nájera concludes by affirming the existence of a Mexican literature: “Yes, it exists, even if it is not as rich as as those found in other countries at a more advanced stage of evolution” (86). The slight nod toward the Liceo Hidalgo’s insistent demand to define Mexican literature allows Gutiérrez Nájera to shift the terms of the debate and examine literary production in a cosmopolitan framework. The “fondo común de la literature,” much like the “naciones más

avanzadas en la evolución,” speaks to a certain Eurocentric understanding of culture and cultural development. Yet this position does not negate that alternative forms of development are possible. Gutiérrez Nájera does not explicitly claim that Mexico needs to become more like France, Spain, or other European countries in order to become more developed; instead, he advocates for the cultivation of the “unique nature” which expresses the individuality of each national literature.

Gutiérrez Nájera’s definition of national literature affirms the aspirations for progress that characterized Mexican liberalism at the end of the nineteenth century, and it also frames those aspirations around a female figure. As Charles Hale has shown, the writings of Auguste Comte and Herbert Spencer circulated widely among the “liberal establishment,” propagating a popular belief that societies behaved like natural organisms, and as such, were subject to the laws of evolution and change (205). But why would Gutiérrez Nájera couple this accepted sociological principle in his definition of national literature with an image of a young woman’s maturing breasts? The mild eroticism unites the question of social and literary formation with traditionally paternal and romantic expectations for the treatment of women. The female figure in this essay is objectified and her body becomes the inspiration for doctrinal statements about absolute aesthetic, moral, or sociological truths. The narration of female sexuality, then, becomes homologous to the narration of national literature itself. Magda’s story, read through this definition, becomes the story of Mexican literature, which explains why she is crying out from the handwritten pages to the author dramatized in the novel’s dedication. The need to interpret this story against the dominant beliefs in positivist materialism lead to the adoption of the residual Catholicism of Mexico’s colonial and romantic past.

Over ten years after the publication of *Por donde se sube al cielo*, Gutiérrez Nájera's vision of a private space in which artistic and spiritual value could be cultivated away from the corruption of public spaces appeared in the *Revista Azul*'s first article. Again articulating his views of the social role of literature through metaphors and similes, El Duque Job explained that the *Revista Azul* was like a private home and that "A esta casa no llegarán los envidiosos, los mal educados, los que al pisar alfombras las enlodan, los que no saben conversar con una dama. Para que no entre esa gentuza y para recibir a los amables invitados estoy de guardia al pie de la escalera." The "house" that Gutiérrez Nájera describes here sits above the street, and once again beauty and civility are embodied by a woman. The space is also a vivid metaphor for the community of ideal readers of the revista itself. El Duque Job introduces the "casa" as already constituted, obfuscating the projection of values onto the reading public that invites them into the isolated world. The readers are at once already there and still on the outside, waiting to pass under the writer's evaluative gaze. The supporting imagery for the central metaphor, the "alfombras" and the "escalera" emphasize the luxury and opulence of the values of this erudite and exclusive literary sphere. Assuming a position of power over the world with an authoritative narrative voice, Gutiérrez Nájera, like the dramatized writer of his novel, argues that separation from the material world and the cultivation of artistic taste will produce spiritual purity and allow the society to develop and reach its full potential. In this way, the writer affirms the intellectual's position in Mexican society as a reliable public commentator, particularly through the publication of novels that could have broad appeal. The criticisms of materialism and the assertion of universal artistic and spiritual values, however, challenged the literary establishment to adopt a less combative stance toward European literature and opened possibilities for exploring the consequences of modernization.



*Por donde se sube al cielo* carries forward Altamirano's desire to reform Mexican society through literature that permeated Mexico's elite culture after the French Intervention. But as some writers began to dogmatically explore local themes in the development of these national narratives, Gutiérrez Nájera responded with a call to cosmopolitanism. Rejecting the positivist materialism that became dominant in late 1870s Mexico, he defended idealized forms of beauty and morality by appealing to a discourse of taste and distinction. Though he looked to France as a model for civilization and culture, he did not abandon the cultural specificity of Mexico City, even when writing about Paris. El Duque Job was not afraid to engage in polemics with his peers, even when they agreed on a majority of issues. Along with the rest of the Porfirian *intelligentsia*, he collaborated with the Díaz regime, perpetuated oppressive gender stereotypes, and ignored the social reality of most of the Mexican population. The polemics over aesthetic ideals and their role in social morality, however, benefitted from his interventions. His resistance to positivist materialism positioned the intellectual as an active, discerning member of society. In his *crónicas*, poems, and novel, he put in play many of the stylistic and rhetorical forms that have become associated with Spanish American *modernismo*. In this way he challenged Mexico's intellectual elite to reevaluate their priorities and rediscover the value of spiritual idealism. In Chapter 2, I explore how Gutiérrez Nájera's provocations in *Por donde se sube al cielo* were taken up in three novels by Amado Nervo, a devoted follower of El Duque Job who used his prose to develop his own model of spiritual and aesthetic idealism. In his own way, Nervo picks up where Gutiérrez Nájera leaves Magda, at the individual's encounter with competing spiritual and material forces.

## Chapter Two: The Cult of *El Ideal* in the Early Novels of Amado Nervo

After years of work in Mexico City's press, in 1894 Manuel Gutiérrez Nájera founded the *Revista Azul*, a literary periodical guided by his cosmopolitan aesthetic sensibilities and his interest in documenting the changes introduced to Mexico by modernization. Thanks to El Duque Job's successful partnership with Carlos Díaz Duffoo and the willingness of the publishers of *El Liberal* to offer the *Revista Azul* as a supplement on Sundays, dozens of young writers and journalists gravitated toward the literary magazine as it began to represent Mexican culture with images drawn from European-style modernization. In addition to a callously elitist disregard for the large majority of Mexico's poor and illiterate population, the *Revista Azul* embraced a cosmopolitan cultural agenda that inspired an entire generation of poets, novelists, and artists to publish innovative works of prose and poetry. Within this group of ambitious writers was a seminary dropout turned journalist named Amado Nervo.<sup>1</sup> After arriving in Mexico City in 1895, Nervo presented himself publicly as a disciple of El Duque Job, but on the way to becoming a leader and spokesperson for Mexico's *modernista* writers, he fashioned his own literary and journalistic identity through provocations with the Mexican literary establishment.

Since 1876 Gutiérrez Nájera had emphatically proclaimed that Mexico needed a non-realist, non-patriotic literature, so when Nervo and his compatriots began to experiment with new forms of writing in the 1890s their efforts built on his example. These ambitious intellectuals deliberately and consciously came together; their desire to form a collective artistic identity arose out of daily interactions at the *Revista Azul* and in the publishing houses of other Mexico City periodicals. As collaboration became more comfortable for the male writers, their mutual affiliation triggered complaints from critics that assessed literature according to its adherence to tradition and respect for natural law. One of the most fiery polemics involving Nervo and the

*modernistas* began at the outset of 1898 when Victoriano Salado Álvarez, an influential conservative author and critic, used a review of Francisco M. de Olaguguíbel's poetry collection *Oro y negro* as an opportunity to launch an attack on the *modernistas*.<sup>2</sup> Salado Álvarez wrote:

Ustedes los mexicanos *modernistas* (creo que ésa es la palabra) sin tener en cuenta cosas tan sencillas, se dan a imitar frases, dicción, metro e ideas de los poetas franceses novísimos, y consiguen, no sólo que el gran público no las entienda, sino que la pequeña minoría que lee, los moteje de no comprender su época. ("Los modernistas mexicanos. *Oro y negro*" 206)

In the first published response to Salado Álvarez, Nervo staked out a position for the Mexican *modernistas*, claiming that "es propio y genuino del poeta adelantarse a su época" ("Los modernistas mexicanos. Replica" 217). Stating that *modernismo* is directed toward *el símbolo* and *la relación* as the ultimate ends of literary activity, Nervo declared: "Mientras el hombre no perciba todas las relaciones ni encuentre todos los símbolos, será imperfecto. Ahora bien, el poeta moderno busca el símbolo y la relación" (219). Nervo viewed literature as an essential activity in Porfirian Mexico in the 1890s because through symbols and other literary relationships, new ways of seeing the world could be made available to an ever-growing audience of Mexican readers.

Nervo believed that *modernismo* was necessary to sustain the vitality of Mexican literature and culture, and he saw the incorporation of cosmopolitan images as part of the *modernista* enterprise. At the same time his narratives also explored a recognizable Mexican social reality where strict divisions existed between rich and poor and between men and women. In *Pascual Aguilera* (1892), *El bachiller* (1895), and *El donador de almas* (1899) Nervo rejected several conventions that characterized the Mexican novel during the Porfiriato while maintaining

a keen interest in exploring how the changes brought about by modernity impacted the Mexican environments that he knew well.<sup>3</sup>

Unafraid to challenge literary and moral conventions that accompanied the institutionalization of the Díaz regime and the policies that promised *paz y orden* for the wealthy as well as for the growing middle class, Nervo championed *modernismo* as a correction to worldviews that interpreted individual and social activity as determined by consequences of material conditions. Nervo's novels challenge materialism with representations of spiritual experiences that arise from feelings of doubt, uncertainty, and discontent. Far from using determinism to chart specific moral failures or successes in society like other realist and naturalist works that were popular in the 1890s, his novels approach recognizable situations of love and loss with a sense of horror that shocks the reader. For Nervo, as for Gutiérrez Nájera, the ecstatic moments and feelings produced by Catholic spirituality provided more cultural power than the clericalism or strict moralizing that appeared in other Porfirian novels. In his work dreams and meditations alter characters' perceptions of the world and create a space set apart from the immediate social environment. Unlike the bourgeois and tacitly-official belief that Catholic morality would provide the peaceful foundation for the formation of the liberal Mexican state, the representation of Catholicism in Nervo's *modernista* novels emphasized spirituality, denial of the material world, and the assertion of individual free will.

In Nervo's narratives idyllic images of Mexico's colonial structures become the setting for unsettling images and plot twists that raise doubts about whether peace and happiness are possible in Mexican society. In all three novels, psychologically complex characters confront uncomfortable situations consciously and reflectively, resisting deterministic plotlines and archetypal interpretations. The uncertain resolution of moral dilemmas in the plot of his

narratives unites with indeterminate formal characteristics to disrupt readers' expectations and desires for familiar conclusions. Nervo's novels refuse to formally resolve the distorted representation of the moral order that emanates from violent and erotic imagery; supernatural narrative voices, abrupt endings, and circular plots are several of the techniques with which Nervo experimented as he placed the reader in a position of doubt and judgment regarding the actions of his characters. Through these narrative strategies, Nervo's fiction emphasizes the uncertainty and unpredictability of human action in the face of complex social forces and moral questions.

*El ideal* is a concept associated with the plot, characterization, and style of Nervo's novels that the writer modified over time. *El ideal*, for Nervo, was just that, an ideal that could help characters—and readers—confront and overcome moral, spiritual, and emotional uncertainty. Readers from the nineteenth to the twenty-first centuries find in Nervo's fiction a confluence between morals and aesthetics where unexpected plot twists and stylistic choices challenge their expectations in a way that opens literary practice to the expression of new views of social behavior. The spiritual and cultural exploration of *el ideal* is not the only reaction to modernization that can be found in Nervo's narratives. Shocking and challenging representations of gender and sexuality in all three of the novels studied in this chapter have attracted critical attention from scholars interested in the changing social and moral codes of the Porfiriato. Robert McKee Irwin argues that in Nervo contemporary readers can find a “chilling rainstorm of sexual angst that brings to light the anxieties of gender and sexuality in turn-of-the-century Mexico” (99). Carlos Monsiváis reads Nervo in a “pre-Freudian” light to identify a strong current of repression in Nervo's prose that outlines the limits of social propriety (87). In Christopher Conway's view, Nervo infuses his prose with “anxieties about the fate of

masculinity in the modern age” (462), and Nancy LaGreca has argued that sexuality was, for Nervo, the “font of all cultural production” as he defiantly challenged the social contract of his day (127).

Although guided by these inquiries and others, my analysis of *el ideal* focuses on how angst, repression, anxiety, and defiance manifested themselves rhetorically in Nervo’s fiction, especially the expression of a combative discourse that pursued spiritual idealism through the production and consumption of literature. In their pursuit of *el ideal* the protagonists of *Pascual Aguilera*, *El bachiller*, and *El donador de almas* encounter morality and beauty on their own terms. And the readers of these novels, in turn, are invited to participate in the cult of *el ideal* as well. Nervo’s *modernista* fiction manipulates and distorts familiar romantic and realist narratives to draw attention to the uncertain experiences of Mexico’s cultural moment. Like Gutiérrez Nájera, Nervo was deeply skeptical of positivist materialism, and he wanted *modernismo* to antagonize the determinist philosophies that, he believed, simultaneously reduced literature to a merely illustrative role in society and chained the individual to bourgeois moral and social scripts. He was also concerned that materialism threatened to close the minds of his reading public; symbols, he believed, could inspire new ways of experiencing life in modern Mexico. In the cult of *el ideal* Porfirian readers neither escaped from Mexican reality nor unconditionally submitted to European tastes; instead, they encountered an eclectic arrangement of religious, scientific, and artistic practices that affirmed the freedom of the individual to pursue spiritual, intellectual, and aesthetic idealism.

Nervo and the generation of writers who contributed regularly to the *Revista Azul* and the *Revista Moderna* used *modernismo* as a discourse to challenge traditional literary forms and institutions. *Modernismo*, more often expressed by Nervo as *moderno*, *moderna*, or *modernista*,

became a language, a way of talking about literature and the social world that countered determinist materialism. Because the denotations and connotations of the term “modern” were so vigorously contested within Mexico’s literary field, Nervo and his compatriots needed to stake out a clear position against intellectuals who believed that materialist politics and nationalist images were essential for modernization. Writers who wanted to explore symbolic, and even fantastic, forms and styles used *modernismo* as a banner to unite against the realist conventions defended by the cultural establishment, including critics like Salado Álvarez. Nervo enthusiastically proclaimed in 1898 that “si los modernistas mexicanos podemos discrepar en tales o cuales matices literarios, somos uno cuando se trata de defender nuestro ideal” (“Los modernistas mexicanos. Replica a Victoriano Salado Álvarez” 249). Despite the stylistic divisions within Mexico’s *modernista* movement, which included José Juan Tablada, Balbino Dávalos, Ciro B. Ceballos, Bernardo Couto Castillo, Nervo believed that “todos amamos el símbolo, lo creemos santo, divino, y eso nos hace hermanos” (255). Although internal disagreements threatened to separate *modernista* writers from each other, *modernismo* was the tool that Nervo and his peers wielded together to challenge their critics. It was a discourse with roots in Gutiérrez Nájera’s defense of *poesía sentimental* that stretched toward the formation of new literary institutions, forms, and practices in Mexico.<sup>4</sup>

*Pascual Aguilera*, *El bachiller*, and *El donador de almas* were all published in the 1890s, before Nervo left Mexico to join the diplomatic corps. Gustavo Jiménez Aguirre argues in several biographical accounts of Nervo’s life that between 1894 and 1900 the Nayarit-native immersed himself in professional journalism and in the literary circles of Mexico City and that by the turn of the century he had become one of the most famous men of letters in the capital (“Avatares” 26). Invested in the development of Mexico’s modernizing writing practices and

changing cultural preferences, Nervo earned his reputation with creative and critical works of prose, poetry, and commentary. All three novels emerged from and circulated in the literary circles of the mid-Porfiriato, a cultural moment when Mexico City's intellectual class witnessed the death of Gutiérrez Nájera, the inauguration of both *El Imparcial* and the *Revista Moderna*, as well as the further institutionalization of positivism within the political and educational apparatuses of the State. Nervo's interventions in these discussions forcefully argued to Mexico's intellectual elite that modernity was shifting agency to the individual and that, as a result, literary tastes and moral beliefs needed adjustment.

Born in Tepic in 1870 (at that time Tepic was still part of Jalisco state), Nervo survived on his literary ability in a professional environment that was slowly adapting to the formation of an independent writer class. After cutting his literary and journalistic teeth at a newspaper in Mazatlán, he moved to Mexico City and began writing for *El Mundo Ilustrado*, *El Nacional*, and even the heavily-subsidized mouthpiece for the Díaz regime, *El Imparcial*. Nervo lived throughout this period on revenue paid for his journalistic *crónicas* and theatrical reviews. In 1900 he accompanied the Mexican delegation to the French exposition and in 1904 entered the diplomatic corps. During a decade of service in Spain, he made connections with many Spanish and Latin American writers, building pan-American and trans-atlantic relationships that filled the pages of the *Revista Moderna* with original and reprinted texts from throughout the Spanish-speaking world (Jiménez Aguirre, "Amado Nervo" 541). Observing the administrative tumult of the Mexican Revolution from abroad, Nervo maintained his post and was sent to the Southern Cone in 1915. His death in Montevideo, Uruguay in 1919, was followed by months of celebrations, commemorations, and official ceremonies, both in Mexico and in other cultural centers of Spanish America. Manuel Durán has noted that from Buenos Aires to Havana to



Mexico City, Nervo's death was an "apotheosis" of mourning that lasted over six months before the poet was laid to rest in the Rotundo de los Hombres Ilustres on 14 November 1919 (106-07).<sup>5</sup>

Though Nervo is more frequently anthologized and remembered as an author of lyric poetry, his prose corpus also circulated widely in Mexico, Spanish America, and Europe during his lifetime. With the publication of his first novel, *El bachiller*, in 1895, Nervo became an established literary figure known for his exceptional descriptive abilities and provocative ideas. Nervo was highly regarded by many of his contemporaries, but after his death his work was largely ignored, and even ridiculed, by the post-revolutionary generation of Mexican poets and scholars. Contempt for Nervo's collaboration with the Díaz regime and his enduring representation of Mexico under Carranza after 1917 was a reasonable political motive for this neglect, and the fantastic spirituality of Nervo's work also radically differed from the more gritty realism of revolutionary literature. José Emilio Pacheco sympathetically pointed out in the 1960s that Nervo played an important role in the formation of Mexican *modernismo*, but he maintained a popular condemnatory stance toward Nervo's verse that maligned it for being *cursi*, or woefully unrefined (II, 5). In the last fifty years, Nervo's prose has slowly regained a central position in Mexican literary and cultural studies as writers and critics have read it through contemporary psychoanalytic, feminist, and queer theories. Nervo's fascination with science has also earned him *cachet* with the growing public of writers and readers of science fiction in Mexico.<sup>6</sup>

Nervo and his peers worked to free themselves from the obligation to educate readers or create narratives with specific political goals. Rejecting the explicitly didactic tone that positioned Gutiérrez Nájera in line with Mexico's more traditional novels, Nervo and other *modernista* novelists from the 1890s—Ciro B. Ceballos and Ángel del Campo, for example—

shaped their work as visionary contributions to Mexico's national culture. Ana Laura Zavala Díaz has described this shift in the relationship between the writer and his public during the middle period of the Porfiriato: "aun cuando ya no cumpliría con una función didáctica, el escritor sería un visionario que trabajaría para el futuro, para el progreso de la cultura nacional, a través de la experimentación creativa y del 'entrecruzamiento' con otras literaturas del orbe moderno" (53). This visionary quality of Nervo's work that Zavala Díaz describes stemmed from his interest in spiritualism and idealism, and led him to eclectically sample ideas from Catholicism, theosophy, Pythagoreanism, Buddhism, and even modern astronomy in his work. Nervo often suggested that *el ideal* could be approached from many different philosophical positions, and this flexible approach to spiritual and aesthetic idealism became one of the hallmarks of his work. In 1919 Alfonso Reyes highlighted the mixture of cosmovisions in Nervo's writing, noting several contradictions in the poet's persistent exploration of spirituality:

El amor de Dios era para él una cosa tan tramada en la vida, que no aceptó nunca a desentrañarlo de la materia. Era el poeta de una espiritualidad adorosa y transparente, como la llama azul del alcohol; pero chisporroteaban en la llama, aunque exhalaba hacia arriba, algunas partículas de materia incandescente. No se conformó con el espíritu puro. No le bastaba creer en la inmortalidad del alma: quería, también, jugar a la inmortalidad del alma. Era religioso, pero era supersticioso. ("El camino" *Obras* VIII 23-24)

Certainly unorthodox in his articulation of beliefs about the soul, Nervo was also profoundly interested in science, especially astronomy. Unlike the positivist technocrats of the Porfiriato who used the scientific method to fashion social policy, Nervo's scientific energy was directed toward observation and sharing scientific discovery with non-specialists. González Guerrero has noted that an interesting feature of Nervo's biography is his membership in the *Sociedad*

*Astronómica de México*, and that the young poet combined scientific and religious ideas in his “obsessive aspiration toward the stars” (26-27).<sup>7</sup> Though it may seem odd for readers familiar with the conflict between science, religion, and folk tradition to reconcile modern science with Nervo’s fascination with spirituality, both were part of his pursuit of *el ideal*. “Scientific passion in Nervo did not exist in isolation,” Christopher Conway has observed, “but rather in combination with parallel and intersecting interests in esoteric and spiritualist epistemologies” (463).

Nervo embraced spirituality in his pursuit of new aesthetic forms, but this strategy could hardly be considered an escape from Mexico’s reality given the rich detail that fills his novels. Critical judgments of Nervo’s early novels indicate that he adeptly created images and characters that realistically evoked scenes and feelings of Porfirian Mexican life.<sup>8</sup> Even Julio Jiménez Rueda, writing in 1944, observed the uneasy tension between nationalism and cosmopolitanism in Nervo’s work before claiming that the religiousness of the Tepic native was “very Mexican” (*Letras* 185). The religious education that Nervo received prior to his professionalization as a journalist and writer undoubtedly had a significant impact on the young writer; Catholic spirituality was one way for Nervo to access the cult of *el ideal* that was at the heart of his articulation of *modernismo*. In a *crónica* titled “Mi Cristo” published in 1895 in *El Nacional*, Nervo wrote about Jesus of Nazareth: “El maestro de los ojos zarcos tiene para mí dos nombres: se llama Cristo y se llama Ideal. Con el segundo, lo conozco mejor.” And in his second reply to Salado Álvarez in 1898, Nervo decried the use of innumerable terms that divided the different “schools” of *decadentista* and *modernista* and affirmed that “el ideal es uno” (“Los modernistas mexicanos. Replica a Victoriano Salado Álvarez” 252).<sup>9</sup>

By the late 1890s, Nervo began to frequently point to the experience of *el ideal* as a guiding force in his literary production. While writers throughout the Western World had, since the Renaissance, pursued formal aesthetic perfection in service to specific religious ideologies, in Mexico's experience of *modernismo* at the end of the nineteenth century idealized religious goals began to mix with idealized views of social progress and economic success that all people wanted to pursue. Nervo's vision of *el ideal* sought to bring together the various strands of idealism in a single strand; he expressed this most clearly in a comment in *El donador de almas* when Alda, the feminine main character, succinctly connects idealism, romanticism, and artistic creation in a statement that could be interpreted as an *ars poetica* of Nervo's entire *modernista* enterprise: "¡El ideal, el arte y el amor no son más que el *presentimiento del infinito!*... Este instinto es el que nos impide el reposo, la ventura, la ecuanimidad en la ergástula enorme del planeta..." (223). Porfirian readers could certainly understand the notion that love was an "instinct," a natural inclination free from moral judgment, and Alda's comment opens associations between the desire for productive romance and the idealistic aims of artistic production itself. Novels, operas, poems, and paintings are, in this schema, instruments of transcendental experience that must be explored as part of the pursuit of *el ideal*. In what follows, I trace the formation of Nervo's conception of *el ideal* in several novels that confront the changing social landscape of modernized Mexico.

In Nervo's novels idealism can be manifested in spiritual, aesthetic, and moral ways, yet *el ideal* continuously proves to be elusive. The blend of philosophic, scientific, religious, and artistic beliefs compel readers to consider with fresh eyes and minds the notion of *el ideal* and whether or not it is served by familiar practices and attitudes. Identifying Nervo as "the best writer of fiction among the *modernistas*," Brushwood claimed that in *Pascual Aguilera*, *El*

*bachiller*, and *El donador de almas*, readers encounter “a constant striving toward the new, the strange, the unexperienced—a striving born of disillusionment with the ordinary world that stands in the way of hope” (146-48). Brushwood’s praise should remind contemporary readers that while the mood and tone of Nervo’s novels were not necessarily hopeful, a profound uneasiness with the status quo motivated the author to look for moral and aesthetic inspiration outside of material reality with a hopeful spirit. José María Martínez has contended more recently that the spiritual response to materialism in Nervo’s work projects an organic and unified cosmovision over a world fragmented by capitalism and the scientific method. “[L]o que al final se propone,” he argues about Nervo’s work, “es la destrucción de la reductora cosmovisión de los racionalismos ilustrados y los positivismos decimonónicos” (“Fantasías irónicas” 410). Nervo’s eclectic approach to *el ideal* challenged the dominant paradigms of Porfirian political and cultural thought, and, as I seek to show here, this challenge was made possible by the innovative narrative strategies that amplified the inherent uncertainty of the moral situations confronted by his characters. By directly challenging literary conventions, Nervo’s devotion to *el ideal* became a rallying cry for an entire generation of young writers at the end of the nineteenth century.

Rich and dense descriptions of characters and scenery express a poetic sensibility in Nervo’s novels that refuses to submit to the transparent and mimetic style of the late nineteenth-century Spanish American novel. Nervo fashioned his novels out of several recognizable conventions and styles (*realismo*, *costumbrismo*, *naturalismo*), but classifying his work within any single one of these traditions risks overlooking the relationships between different narrative modes that produce the complex representations of social morality, spirituality, and literary value in all three works studied in this chapter. Above all, Nervo was an eclectic writer. He was

familiar with many European texts but resisted aligning himself with any single aesthetic agenda taken from nineteenth-century Europe. Drawing from multiple traditions and styles, Nervo aspired to adjust the tastes and attitudes of his reading public to fit the needs and demands of a country in the process of modernization. Nervo's desire to innovate extended to the novel form itself: he classified *Pascual Aguilera*, *El bachiller*, and *El donador de almas* as novels, though his understanding of the word *novel* left many contemporaries—and critics in the 20th-century—wondering whether or not he understood that a novel should have a lengthy extension.<sup>10</sup>

Unwilling to let these complaints stand, Nervo defended the length of his novels at the conclusion of *El donador de almas*, when the narrator argues to a critic in a dramatic dialogue that “Ours is the era of the *nouvelle*.” The narrator elaborates his point by explaining that, like the velocity of a train, narratives would necessarily accelerate as a result of modernization (*Obras* II, 344). Eclectically flexible in his narrative style, Nervo founded the cult of *el ideal* with innovative narrative effects that challenged conventional expectations for the representation of moral behavior in Porfirian Mexico.

*Pascual Aguilera* appears as the first novel in most anthologies of Nervo's prose because, as he explains in the novel's prologue, it was written at the earliest point in his career, likely in 1892.<sup>11</sup> The novel employs several familiar narrative conventions without committing to any of them. Bearing the subtitle “costumbres regionales,” *Pascual Aguilera* describes hacienda life in believable detail. A love triangle, rural imagery, and soliloquies of a tortured soul evoke romantic sensibilities while at the same time the narrator recounts the story as if psychological and environmental factors had predetermined the characters' actions, a hallmark of naturalist narratives. Instead of appealing to material or financial difference as a determining factor for personal success, however, the novel examines the darker side of the Mexican countryside,

casting doubt on whether marriage, the hacienda system, or the Church are capable of providing support for the spiritual and moral needs of everyday people. The protagonist's sudden and grotesque demise is a warning to readers that spiritual health cannot be ignored, and that physical power or wealth may conceal destructive forces that threaten the vitality of *el ideal*.

Nervo introduces *el ideal* in *Pascual Aguilera* as a moral philosophy that could prevent violence and excess from destroying the peaceful harmony of hacienda life. When the peace and tranquility of the rural order are grotesquely disrupted by the protagonist's aggressive lust, the novel exposes how the capitalist greed of the hacienda and the clericalism of the Catholic Church have left two of Mexico's most important institutions ill-prepared to confront the emerging individualism associated with modernized commerce and culture. *El ideal* may be a solution to these problems, but the protagonist, Pascualillo, does not realize that he could pursue a different course until it is too late. Readers of *Pascual Aguilera* are thus left with a question concerning whether or not Pascualillo's tragic fate could have been avoided. Speaking through the narrator after his death, Pascualillo himself testifies to the spiritual dimension of this question without offering a firm vision of what the protagonist or his mother, Doña Francisca, could have done differently. In this preliminary articulation, Nervo positions *el ideal* as a potential force for personal salvation which Pascualillo either ignores or cannot embrace. The deceased protagonist's eerie soliloquy from beyond the grave, however, introduces *el ideal* to Nervo's readers as a potential resource for individuals who confront excessive and dangerous physical desires in an environment no longer understandable by the practices of the hacienda or the Church.

For a *costumbrista* novel *Pascual Aguilera* paints hacienda life with curiously somber tones. Encounters with sin, pain, and death avoid reinforcing the status quo through self-assured

judgments; instead the novel directs readers toward the exploration of personal—and almost existential—experiences of moral and spiritual truths. The title character is the heir to the hacienda, and although genre conventions would lead readers to expect a sentimental and romantic plotline in which the honorable protagonist is paired with a beautiful, virtuous young woman, Nervo's incursion into the *costumbrista* novel realistically portrays the distorted balance of power between the *hacendado* and his *peones*. Pascualillo is the eponymous protagonist who pursues romantic attachment with Refugio, a poor, beautiful peasant who is engaged to Santiago, one of the area's most respected *vaqueros*. Unwilling to accept Refugio's rejection, Pascualillo incessantly pursues her, especially after she moves into the hacienda's estate during her preparation for a post-Easter wedding. But as the illegitimate son of the deceased *patrón*, Pascualillo's power over Refugio is mitigated by his obedience to his adopted mother, the devout Doña Francisca. After several evenings of voyeuristic spying on Refugio's bedchamber, Pascualillo loses control and sets out to dominate Refugio sexually, but his wrath leads him, shockingly, to ravish his mother instead. The next morning Pascualillo's body is discovered in Doña Francisca's room, where the local doctor determines that intense physical activity had produced a fatal cerebral hemorrhage. The last scene of the novel dwells on the young man's death and his mother's despair, sidestepping a more optimistic conclusion that possibly could have included Refugio's union with Santiago and a celebration of the preservation of her honor.

According to Nervo *Pascual Aguilera* was shaped by lived experience and observations made in his youth. In the brief prologue to the novel, Nervo explained that it was written several years prior to publication and that the work “fue escrito con amor y entusiasmo, de acuerdo con el paisaje que me rodeaba, y que si hay en él rudezas y colores vivos, son los vivos colores y las rudezas de mis trópicos” (157). Recognizing that *rudezas* and *colores vivos* are euphemisms for



the most sensational sexual aspects of the novel, Nervo's introduction provocatively understates Pascualillo's behavior. In it, Nervo also preemptively defends himself against claims from readers and critics who might venture to deny the validity of his observations of the rural social order. Rich descriptions of the Mexican landscape open the narration; the narrator begins with a panoramic view of the valley before focusing on the details of the architectural and natural landscape of the hacienda. In the descriptions of the house, the chapel, the herds of cattle, the forests, and the gardens, Mexican flora and fauna evoke a regional atmosphere. *Nopaleras* and *tulipanes* draw the narrator's eyes with their color and arrangement, as does the *zanate* that "hendía los ámbitos del patio, como flecha de obsidiana" (158-59). From cacti to obsidian, Mexican images and vocabulary anchor the reader in a familiar setting.

Pushing beyond *costumbrismo* and the affirmation of local customs and values, in *Pascual Aguilera* Mexico is more than a collection of images and words inherited from the past; it also acts as a spiritual realm where the pursuit of *el ideal* can take place. Before introducing characters into the landscape, the extradiegetical narrator steps back from his introduction to the setting and proudly states, "El panorama, visto desde lo alto de una loma, habría embelesado a un colorista. Era pomposo y opulento bajo el cielo limpísimo, cielo mexicano, que combaba su zafiro infinito, formando el palio de aquella magnífica naturaleza en primavera" (159). The narrator's insistence that the landscape is completely Mexican not only legitimizes the *costumbrista* observations that drive the novel's action, but also points to the spiritual and idealized characteristics of Mexico itself. As he sets up the scene the narrator turns his gaze to the chapel and sees "una cruz de hierro que rasgaba el azul con sus brazos protectores" (158). The symbolic association between the sky, the cross, and *azul*, a color closely associated with *modernismo*'s aesthetic idealism, unites Mexican identity with symbols of spiritual and literary

idealism. When the narrator elevates his gaze to see the cross as a sign of divine protection and then looks down on the valley from the heights of a nearby hill he foreshadows the questions and doubts that Pascualillo's behavior produces for Doña Francisca, Refugio, and the reading public.

In Pascualillo readers encounter a character who, like other naturalist protagonists, seems to submit to depraved behaviors that threaten the stable courtship practices and family relationships around him. The social order of the hacienda in *Pascual Aguilera* is organized around obedience to the Catholic Church.<sup>12</sup> As readers confront the disjuncture between Pascualillo's "nature" and the expectations placed upon him, resolution appears to be readily available from the narrator's "objective" perspective: Pascualillo is the product of an adulterous affair, and suffers from what the narrator refers to as "suspicious hysteria" and "savage eroticism," even at the age of five (165). Burdened with these neurological diagnoses, Pascualillo should not be able to overcome his nature with any act of free will, ultimately succumbing to it in a violent outburst of sexual desire.

But *Pascual Aguilera* is not strictly naturalist; it incorporates naturalist narrative techniques alongside traditional romantic tropes to chart the relationship between material determinism, which appears to motivate Pascualillo's actions, and free will, which Doña Francisca uncomfortably confronts in the sexual encounter with her son. Scientific discourse points toward the determining role social factors, but whether or not Pascualillo's fate is entirely preordained becomes the enigma that lingers at the end of the novel. Additionally, Pascualillo is a representative character that stands in for the distorted economic relationships of the hacienda. In Porfirian Mexico, the ideas of Auguste Comte and Herbert Spencer validated notions that an individual's ideas and behaviors needed to be understood in relation to society as a whole (Hale 205). Given this widely held belief, Pascualillo's weaknesses signal broad social problems that

reach beyond the question of his individual salvation. The narrator explicitly associates the young *hacendado*'s violent temper and insatiable lust with the grotesque power relationships of rural Mexico: "Si sus libidinosidades fueron en auge, también aumentó su afán por el trabajo, y temprano dio muestras de ser un hábil hacendado" (168). Pascualillo's inability to control his longing for Refugio colors the description of being "un hábil hacendado" with critical tones, introducing a subtle critique of the rural economic order that was largely absent from any novel in Porfirian Mexico.<sup>13</sup> Lamarckian evolutionary language further foreshadows Pascualillo's inability to fit into the genteel romantic order. Describing the elder Pascual's youthful "depredaciones" with the lower-class women of his city, the narrator explains: "Acaso se excedió algo en sus placeres, y ellos le dejaron como reliquias, primero, cierto agotamiento nerviosos, y a últimas fechas, un hijo espúreo, al cual su madre, que pronto despejó de la vida, al cristianarlo llamó Pascual, con voluntad manifiesta de que el nombre y apellido del vástago proclamasen la cepa, hidalga para ella, de donde procedía" (164). When the narrator later asserts that Pascualillo is "dominated by savage eroticism," he encourages readers to condemn the young man based on a pseudoscientific belief in behavioral determinism propagated through biology (165).

Unlike Pascualillo, whose self-destructive behavior appears to be biologically—and narratively—determined, Doña Francisca confronts uncertain emotional and social conditions. For this reason Carlos Monsiváis argues that Doña Francisca is the true protagonist of *Pascual Aguilera* (85). Following the matron's character arc, Monsiváis interprets the entire novel as "una incursión prefreudiana concentrada en el vano intento de escapar y domeñar al instinto" (83). Pascualillo embodies unfettered desire, but his mother is the figure who vainly struggles to suppress her sexuality. Doña Francisca's denial of the material world is almost as problematic as Pascualillo's complete submission to carnal desire. Despite her devotion to traditional Catholic

virtues—namely chastity and charity—she suffers rape at the hands of her son. Within the novel, Santiago suggests this interpretation of Doña Francisca's actions when he laments that “con sus avemarías, sus misas y sus pláticas con el cura [Doña Francisca] cree que se arregla todo, mientras a furto de ella hace su hijo lo que hace!” (161). Doña Francisca's complicated emotional reaction after Pascualillo's assault further reveals uneasiness with the suitability of faithfulness to church dogma for individuals who confront problems in the physical world. She admits to herself that she enjoyed the experience, despite the obvious taboos associated with it: “¡Una hora de amor! ¡Ella había tenido una hora de amor! ¡Y con quién! Con su entenado, casi su hijo... Y había consentido sin otra protesta que la de un simulacro de resistencia más o menos prolongado...” (181). The ellipses in the text show her thoughts racing as she struggles to cope with her feelings about the sexual contact with her adopted son. Ultimately Doña Francisca is unable to find resolution to these feelings, and the novel concludes with an image of her kneeling in prayer at the foot of a statue of the *Virgen de la Soledad* (185).

In the face of Pascualillo's untempered carnal desire and the doubts that Doña Francisca feels about her faithfulness, *Pascual Aguilera* offers readers the first glimpse of the cult of *el ideal* that, while lacking definition at this early point in Nervo's literary career, points toward *modernismo*'s frustration with accepted social and aesthetic norms. As the narrator intently examines Pascualillo's face where he lies dead on Doña Francisca's bed, the young man's wide grin and fixed stare communicate a mute dying declaration that the narrator transcribes for his readers. In his own words, Pascualillo, now deceased, confesses: “yo no había nacido para amar el ideal y no hubo en mi espíritu un rinconcito donde el ideal se acurrucase” (184). Multiple meanings of *el ideal* can be found Pascualillo's *post mortem* confession: he could be suggesting that he had failed to understand the value of temperance, sexual purity, or filial obedience for

moral virtue. But readers could also ask whether he is more concerned with traditional Catholic ethical principles or, given that he also talks about the processes of life and death that follow his own burial, notions of morality and self-realization imported from Eastern religions. These multiple interpretations of *el ideal* are not mutually exclusive; taken together they suggest a broad horizon of possibilities available for literary exploration as an extension of the pursuit of appropriate moral expectations freed from the restrictive embrace of materialist determinism and Catholic dogma.

Spirituality and religion are not coterminous in *Pascual Aguilera*. In the pursuit of *el ideal* the narrative even seems to ridicule the Catholic beliefs held by its reading public. Catholic notions of spirituality, purity, and salvation saturate the narration and imagery of the novel, but *Pascual Aguilera* could not be confused with the *manuales* and other devout texts that popularly circulated among Mexican Catholics. The explicit content of the novel would have aggravated the prudish sensibilities of almost every nineteenth-century Mexican reader, regardless of whether or not he or she were a faithful Catholic. Framing Pascualillo's mania in religious discourse, the narrator explains that "Su pecado [...] era el pecado único y fatal que no ofende acaso a una *divinidad indiferente*, pero que estanca y retiene sin remedio el progreso y la felicidad de los seres, impidiendo el perfecto matrimonio intelectual, soñado por los apóstoles de la civilización. [...] Su pecado era, en fin, el espíritu de la fornicación" (168, original emphasis). By emphasizing God's indifference in the text, the narrator directly contradicts the priest's affirmation of a personified deity at the conclusion of the novel. Yet the connotation of sin remains as the narrator positions Pascualillo's depravity as an obstacle for both individual progress and the formation of "the perfect intellectual marriage." The notion of an ethereal union between man and woman, undeveloped in *Pascual Aguilera*, eventually became the focus of

Nervo's later novel *El donador de almas*, but even at this early stage the reading public may recognize that Nervo believed in romantic experience outside of the physical and material worlds. Further complicating this view of morality, the narrator argues that Pascualillo's individual progress is impeded by his sexual desire, evoking the public mantra of the Porfirian regime: "*orden y progreso*." In the face of God's indifference, morality became an intellectual, political, and above all, social problem in Porfirian Mexico. Nervo confronted this shift in Mexican culture through literature, uniting the pursuit of an aesthetic ideal with the pursuit of "correct" and "appropriate" moral behavior.

Nervo did not edit and publish *Pascual Aguilera* until several years after he achieved fame in Mexico City's literary community, but for readers who have access to edited collections of his work the novel captivatingly introduces the idea of *el ideal* in the first moments of Nervo's journalistic and literary career. The concept of *el ideal* debuted publicly in Nervo's second novel, *El bachiller*, published in 1895 by *El Mundo*. As with the conclusion of *Pascual Aguilera*, readers and critics were horrified by the final scene in *El bachiller* when Felipe, a neophyte priest confronted with carnal temptation, emasculates himself rather than submit to the amorous advances of a beautiful woman. Felipe does not represent the clerical authority of the Catholic Church, but, instead, the more spiritual and transcendental aspects of Catholicism associated with measured asceticism. At the time readers would have recognized obvious parallels with the novel *Pepita Jiménez* by the Spanish writer Juan Valera as well as Justo Sierra's poem *El Beato Calasanz* (de la Peña 9). Although the story's situation was familiar, Nervo's interpretation and, notably, his resolution of the priest's internal conflict, challenged literary, religious, and social attitudes shared among his Mexican readers. In a Mexican literary environment dominated by realist narrative and hand-wringing about sexual impropriety, *El bachiller*'s conventional

structure camouflaged a provocative invitation to idealism as an escape from the aesthetics and ethics bounded by materiality that did not become apparent until the novel's precipitous conclusion.

Opening *El bachiller* to metaphoric interpretation develops the *modernista* exploration of spiritual idealism that takes shape in *Pascual Aguilera*. As I have shown, the story of Nervo's first novel introduced readers to the multiple meanings of *ideal* and suggested that nature condemned certain individuals to fall short, and that Catholic piety was not enough to overcome the urges of sexual desire. In Nervo's second novel this story appears again with a different set of characters. But instead of following the same character arc toward depravity, readers of *El bachiller* confront a young man's decision to choose spiritual purity over sexual desire. Both Felipe and Pascualillo are atypical young men marked from birth with abnormal behaviors and attitudes, and their internal thoughts stage the same conflict that the *modernistas* felt in their pursuit of new aesthetic ideals: can the needs and impulses produced by the material world be overcome? *El bachiller* would seem to argue that it can, not only by representing the protagonist's painful sacrifice, but also by subverting the narrator's control of the interpretation of the young man's story. Reasonable readers could reject the narrator's interpretation that Felipe was "odd" or "sick," and open themselves to new explanations of the protagonist's motives and desires. The result is that Felipe's castration startlingly confronts readers with a character in need of non-material and symbolic experiences of truth and beauty, and they are encouraged to sympathize with him either as an extension of their Catholic spirituality, as curious admirers of *modernista* aesthetics, or both.

The struggle between sexual arousal of the material body and the mental desire to repress those feelings is not necessarily part of the narrator's worldview nor part of his implied

audience's expectations. But for Felipe, the conflict is intense. The violence of the last scene reveals not only the seriousness of Felipe's resolve, but also the incredible cost of denying the pleasurable practices of the material world. The degree to which heterosexual desire should be normatively represented in Porfirian literature was one of the central preoccupations of several reviews and commentaries that were printed after the text of the novel under the heading "Juicios Críticos" in the second edition of *El bachiller*, released in 1896 by *El Nacional*. The opinions of several influential Mexican literary figures of the 1890s, including José María Vigil, Rafael Ángel de la Peña, Luis G. Urbina, Ezequiel A. Chávez, Ciro B. Ceballos, and Victoriano Salado Álvarez indicate that the novel's shocking and quick conclusion resonated within ongoing debates about the relationship between literature and society in Mexico's growing class of *literatos*. In their letters and essays, nine respondents dwelled on the moral integrity of the work and whether or not the narration of Felipe's castration merited aesthetic praise. Even those who were most opposed to the resolution of the plot cited Nervo's beautifully-rendered scenes as they welcomed the young author to the Mexican literary sphere. Hilarión Frías y Soto praised Nervo for being one of "nuestros jóvenes escritores que intentan crear una literatura enteramente nacional" (38).<sup>14</sup> His assessment signaled critical awareness that something was happening to Mexican letters and that Altamirano's post-French Intervention call for a "literatura nacional" was becoming a reality in the Porfiriato, though perhaps not in the way that the founder of *El Renacimiento* had proposed. The style and content of *El bachiller* were fraught with polemics and, as the reviews of the novel demonstrate, were ideologically intent on maintaining the status quo.

Over and over again the narrator of *El bachiller* reminds his audience that the bachelor, Felipe, is an atypical figure. "He was born sick," the narrator states at the outset of the brief



narrative, using medical discourse to presage observations about Felipe's unusual habits and preferences (185). Imaginative, withdrawn, and taciturn, Felipe spends his youth in isolation. He channels the separation from his peers and family into devotion when he enters a seminary and begins theological training. Exhausting himself in the fervent study of religious texts to satiate his desire for divine love and purity, Felipe depletes his physical strength to the point that he collapses on the school patio. When his uncle brings Felipe to his rural estate for rest and recovery the young priestly novice finds himself in close company with Asunción, the daughter of the hacienda's administrator. Once known for being a "marimacho," Asunción unexpectedly arouses her cousin; Felipe, in turn, is tormented with fears of losing his religious vocation (195). These feelings climax in the shocking scene in which Felipe uses a paperknife to castrate himself. Focalizing his gaze through Asunción's horror, the narrator observes a "triumphant smile" in Felipe's pained expression after he emasculates himself, a disturbing image that reifies Felipe's strangeness in the eyes of both the narrator and his implied audience.

Similar to *Pascual Aguilera*, the narrator of *El bachiller* attempts to explain the behavior of the characters through material determinism. But his protagonist, Felipe, desires to use spirituality to alter his inclinations and desires. The extradiegetical narrator recounts the story of the young man's development within a naturalist framework, highlighting the youth's physical infirmity in childbirth to foreshadow his future moral calamity. Time flows chronologically as the narrator speeds up or slows down the narration with summary. With such an introverted protagonist only a few scenes of dialogue appear in the narration, so the feelings, attitudes, and reactions that contribute to character development emerge from the narrator's detailed analysis of the physical reactions of the characters. Even though readers may want to identify with the young lovers, they find themselves restrained by the narrator's distance from the characters'

thoughts and feelings. This narrative distance accentuates Felipe's misgivings about Asunción's advances, subtly setting up the reader for the grotesque finale that shatters readers' expectations and reveals the fervor of the *modernista* embrace of spirituality over materialism. The narrator's inability to explain, and consequently control, Felipe's motives with medical discourse reveals the shortcomings of a material poetics that, in Nervo's narrative world, opens space for the exploration of abstraction and spirituality in literature.

Self-castration disturbingly illustrates the intensity of Felipe's belief. Tortured with uncertainty about his spiritual purity, Felipe directs his anxiety toward his sexual organ, expressing anew the historic tension between religious devotion and sexuality. Based on the tradition of the Abrahamic covenant, circumcision became a rite of passage for Jewish, and later, Christian men, making sexual organs the object of scrutiny and control for religious authorities. Sexuality was a contentious issue for the early Christian church, particularly after 300 CE, when several councils decreed that ministers (who were necessarily men) needed to abstain from sexual activity. Felipe's actions in *El bachiller* imitate the reaction of Origen (ca. 185-250 CE), an influential father of the Catholic Church who emasculated himself in an act of asceticism. Origen was a Biblical scholar who was revered for his interpretations of scripture, and he reportedly destroyed his penis based on a reading of Matthew 18:8, a verse in which Jesus tells his disciples, "If your hand or your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to enter life maimed or lame than to have two hands and two feet and to be thrown into the eternal fire" (*Access Bible*). Origen later publically repudiated his literally self-destructive interpretation of this verse, but the story of his emasculation survived in histories of the church (Trigg 14). Provocatively, Matthew 18:8 appears as an epigraph in *El bachiller*, not

only foreshadowing Felipe's actions, but also questioning the relationship between the physical body and spiritual life for Porfirian readers.

Even though Felipe's bloody self-mutilation could be interpreted as a typical conclusion for a naturalist narrative that explores the degeneration and suffering produced by adherence to Catholic belief within a liberal and secular society, the novel's last images rebel against such a closed reading. Why does Felipe smile after destroying his penis, his tool for physical reproduction and pleasure? The euphoric grin that fills Felipe's visage at the end of the narrative suggests that he achieves a state of ecstasy that transcends the logic of the narrative; his fervent denial of physicality allows him to feel spiritually pure and avoid joining Asunción in a heterosexual coupling. The conclusion of the struggle between physical desire and spiritual purity in Felipe's soul is ambiguous: Felipe may be delusional, but he also may have achieved a state of personal transcendence. This ambiguity is supported by the structure of the last page of the novel. After observing Felipe's "triumphant smile," the narrator's discourse trails off with an ellipsis. On the next line a row of dots appears, separating the last sentence from the rest of the novel that precedes it: "Allá, lejos, en un piélago de oro, se extinguía blandamente la tarde" (199).<sup>15</sup> The sudden shift in perspective away from the action of the plot jolts the reader while at the same time opening several interpretations of the natural image's relationship with the rest of the novel. Is the sun triumphantly setting (as connoted by the golden color of the scene) or is it dying (connoted by the verb *extinguir*)? Does the end of the day reinforce the end of Felipe's reproductive power, irrevocably lost, or does it point toward resurrection and a new life born from his feelings of anguish? To fix a meaning to the last sentence would be futile precisely because the image invites multiple interpretations. With such an abrupt climax, the novel

dissolves not only the readers' expectations of a romantic union, but also the authority of the narrative itself.

The shocking and provocative conclusion of *El bachiller* challenged readers to articulate and defend their interpretive assumptions about the relationship between art and morality. José María Vigil argued that morals and aesthetics were distinct aspects of a work of art:

La belleza, objeto de la Estética, sólo afecta a la forma aplicada a la materia, que constituyen en el orden literario las ideas, los sentimientos, las acciones de los personajes; pero la moralidad no depende precisamente de estas ideas, de esos sentimientos y de esas acciones en sí mismos, sino de su tendencia que es la que determina la emoción en el lector o expectador. (4-5)

For Vigil, then, *El bachiller* was not immoral because no reader, he believed, would try to imitate Felipe's example. Opponents to this view, however, claimed that morality was essential for beauty. Manuel Larrañaga Portugal expressed this judgment in his published letter to Nervo: "tu labor resulta contraria al arte, puesto que se encamina a sostener una solución que entraña un acto delictuoso y por ende inmoral" (23). In the disagreement between Vigil and Larrañaga Portugal, *El Bachiller's* provocation becomes even clearer: should art be able to reject the forces that govern the behavior of the material world? Felipe's example demonstrates to readers that yes, it is possible, and even rewarding, though it obviously comes at a terrible price.

Some critics were willing to praise certain elements of Nervo's first published novel, but the consensus was that *El bachiller* presented readers with an immoral conclusion to the problem of sexual desire and spiritual purity. Reading Felipe's castration as a condemnation of the natural order, Larrañaga Portugal's interpretation was shared by Urbina, Chávez, and Ceballos, men who would later publish alongside Nervo in the pages of the *Revista Moderna*. Ceballos frankly

condemned Nervo's novel because "el hecho realizado por el bachiller viola leyes naturales y las de la sociedad" (52). Appealing to natural law and the accepted social order, critics seemed to adopt the same skepticism regarding Felipe's behavior that colors the narrator's point of view. Chávez asserts the importance of obeying natural law in literature, even as he tried to offer a sympathetic interpretation of *El bachiller*:

El hecho verificado por el bachiller es inmoral porque se imposibilita para el matrimonio, y se mutila física y mentalmente; pero contar ese hecho no es inmoral, siempre que al contarlo se produzcan [...] dos efectos [...]; el primero, la reprobación en el ánimo de los lectores del hecho referido, de suerte que comprendan la enormidad del mismo y sus funestas consecuencias; y el segundo, la lástima y no el enojo hacia el ser inmoral, de manera que la simpatía existe aun para el infeliz, aun para el delincuente. (48)

For Chávez these two qualifying conditions for moral narration are not satisfied in *El bachiller* due to its precipitous conclusion, which invites readers to wonder why the novel refuses to resolve the novel in a predictable way. Was it the result of inexperience? Or haste? Or was it a deliberate choice?

Felipe's resistance to Asunción's expectations for a heterosexual union demonstrates how free will can guide people to make moral decisions that do not necessarily follow from material or biological circumstances. Most of the reviewers in the 1890s questioned the morality of the novel's resolution in addition to complaining about its brevity and the astounding speed of its conclusion. But only Vigil recognized that the temporal arrangements of the narrative were essential to the novel's provocative invitation for greater reader participation in moral and aesthetic literary interpretation. He argued that every reader would "formulate a vote" concerning whether or not Felipe will regret his actions, and that the open-endedness of the

readers' judgments sufficiently defended the novel from allegations of immorality (8). On the side of this argument was Hilarión Frías y Soto, who wrote under his popular pseudonym *El Portero del Liceo Hidalgo*. Frías lamented that the accelerated conclusion of the novel diminished the realism of the text: "Y deja ese libro un hondo desconsuelo porque, como es de moda hoy, deja trunco el argumento, y eso causa en el lector profundo desconsuelo" (43). The departure from conventional narrative may grieve Frías, but Vigil notes that readers would not be able to avoid a personal assessment of Felipe's decision. Both critics form hypotheses about readers' reactions in order to support their readings because the novel denies readers a clear interpretation of the consequences of Felipe's action. This lack of guidance produces accusations of immorality, but, as Vigil notes, those same accusations deny readers the ability to independently interpret the ending. And when the narrator moves away from Felipe and Asunción to look at the sunset in the last sentence of the novel, the shift requires readers to use their individual interpretations to find meaning in the natural image. Inviting readers to actively participate in the formation of literary meaning certainly threatened the literary system in which established critics authorized or rejected works based on their articulation of accepted norms. *El bachiller* challenged this system with rich descriptions of interior and exterior spaces that satisfied critics' desire for mimetic realism. But at the same time the novel asks readers to question the balance between material and spiritual desires in their lives with a horrifying example. Taking into account the irritated comments from the reviews of *El bachiller*, the lack of resolution at the novel's conclusion clearly aggravated sensibilities of the literary establishment.

Felipe is frustrating not just for Asunción, but also for the narrator and for the novel's implied readers. His motivations are not completely incomprehensible or opaque, but neither the narrator nor Asunción can neatly fit him into a recognizable pattern of behavior. The narrator

believes that he can use medical and scientific discourse to explain Felipe's aloofness and sensitivity, and, for her part, Asunción tries to seduce him with the promises of the liberal bourgeois lifestyle. Both attempts to understand Felipe can be seen as projects to control him: for the narrator, this would demonstrate dominance over the character in order to justify social critique through a deterministic narrative, and for Asunción, it would transform Felipe into a husband who could inherit the familial hacienda and maintain the social order.<sup>16</sup> Persistently eluding capture within either ideological structure allows Felipe's character to articulate his idealistic motivation as a fascinating, unfamiliar, and mortally serious belief system.

Despite his attempts to understand Felipe, the narrator confesses that the young man's behavior and attitudes mystify him. After the initial description of Felipe's childhood, the narrator observes that "Para sus amigos y para todos [Felipe] era un enigma, y causaba esa curiosidad que sienten la mujer ante un sobre sellado y el investigador ante una necropolis egipcia no violada aún" (185). Later, when the protagonist collapses in the Seminary, the narrator speculates about the source of Felipe's anxiety:

¿Era que presentía la impotencia de la voluntad ante las grandes exigencias de la naturaleza, que tras largo adormecimiento recobraba en él sus bríos y prefería la deserción a la lucha?

¿Acaso, microcosmos débil, sentía aletear en su rededor todas las fuerzas de la creación y estermecerlo, y adivinaba la derrota de su resistencia flaca?

¡Quién sabe! (193)

These rhetorical questions and the narrator's exclamation of frustration emphasize the difficulty of interpreting Felipe's motivations, an aspect of the narration that sets Felipe apart from other characters and from the audience of implied readers. Although the narrator has access to Felipe's

mental states and can see the vision of Asunción that fills Felipe with panic, he cannot grasp *why* Felipe resists his own sexual arousal in such a strong way. Both attempts to explain Felipe's anxiety point toward the inevitable victory of nature and creation—abstract metonymies for the material world—over the novice's resistant will. Yet the narrator himself recognizes that these are insufficient to the task of explanation.

In her conversations with Felipe, Asunción also questions the novice's adherence to spiritual principles as a philosophy suitable to the modern social world. When she confronts Felipe with her affection at the end of the novel, she challenges his desire to enter the cloister: “¿Por qué desertar de una vida donde tus energías pueden significar mucho en bien de tus semejantes? ¿No eres acaso una fuerza encaminada, como todas las creadas, a lograr un fin universal? ¿Por qué intentas, pues, defraudar a la naturaleza, que aguarda tu grano de arena? ¡Qué vas a hacer a un convento!” (198). Equipped with liberal beliefs in natural law and self-actualization through public activity, Asunción cannot explain Felipe's behavior any more clearly than the narrator with his medical discourse and detailed observation.

By accusing *El bachiller* of immorality, several critics used their authority to take a moral stand. But others adopted a more skeptical approach that restricted their opinions to aesthetic questions, not as a matter of fear, but as a mechanism for defending artistic value against the growing influence of science in public discussions of morality and politics. Larrañaga Portugal and de la Peña both mentioned the evolutionary theories of Herbert Spencer as they condemned Nervo for threatening the natural law of reproduction via the representation of Felipe's castration. But even de la Peña acknowledged that perhaps the novel could play a different role in society:



Cierto es que muchos piensan que toda obra literaria ha de ser docente, o como hoy se dice, *tendenciosa*, y que toda novela o producción dramática ha de ser un capítulo de Sociología o de Psicología o de Economía Política [...]. Podrá suceder que una novela no tenga más objeto que deleitarnos, y si lo consigue, desde el punto de vista del arte, será preferible a novelas científicas que tengan por intento divulgar la ciencia, intento nobilísimo, pero que más tiene de docente y didáctico que artístico. (16)

Though he framed the novel as a simple diversion or luxury, de la Peña pointed out that novels do not need to hew dogmatically to scientific principles because artistic value is not necessarily didactic. Like Vigil, who separated morality and aesthetics, or José Rivera who argued that “en la obra de un artista no hay moralidad ni inmoralidad, sea cual fuere el sentido en que se tomen esas nociones, sino belleza o fealdad,” de la Peña’s argument frees literature from the emerging dominance of theories and policies that sought to regulate and control the material world (25).

Resisting the critical condemnation that followed the publication of *El bachiller* in 1895 affords contemporary readers the opportunity to inquire about the terms of this condemnation in the first place. Urbina, Chávez, Larrañaga Portugal, and Ceballos interpreted the novel based on positivist ideas of science and reproduction, while Vigil, de la Peña, and Rivera measured it against classic works of literature and church history. With this skeptical approach to the reviews a claim made by Frías y Soto stands out for its contrary interpretation of the development of *modernismo*, and of Nervo’s work specifically. His argument, tinged with skeptical and positivist tones, claimed that “el ideal que hoy enferma, sobre todo a los pueblos educados en la civilización latina, es el misticismo,” and further stated that *El bachiller* demonstrated that mysticism has no place in “este siglo” (35; 43). As my reading of the novel has shown, *El*

*bachiller* actually posits that mysticism, to use Frías y Soto's word, should have a place in the modern world because it offers access to *el ideal* and an escape from materialism.

Both the book and the penis are, for Felipe, objects that can be manipulated and even destroyed by acts of heartfelt devotion and free will. A metonymic relationship between cutting the pages of the book and Felipe's emasculation links the protagonist's anxiety about spiritual purity to the act of reading. Faced with Asunción's flirtations and his own feelings of sexual desire, Felipe severs his penis with a knife that he uses to cut the pages of a history book containing the story of Origen that rests on his lap. The narrator sets the scene for the reader, nonchalantly introducing the elements of Felipe's desperate act of self-preservation: "Felipe, que tenía sobre sus rodillas una entrega de una publicación intitulada *Historia de la Iglesia*, desfloraba lentamente, con aguda y filosa plegadera de acero, sus páginas" (197). Though readers could hardly predict to what end the knife would be used in the concluding scene, the verb *desfloraba* eerily foreshadows a scene of sexual violence. So when Felipe turns the knife on himself to escape sexual temptation, the readers are left to wonder about the meaning of Felipe's "triumphant smile" mentioned above. Linking morality with reading through the image of the knife emphasizes the seriousness of Felipe's dilemma and emphasizes the power that reading—and literary activity in general—can and should have for Mexico's readers. The collection of impassioned responses and reviews of the novel demonstrates that Nervo successfully provoked these discussions about the connection between society and literature in Porfirian Mexico.

If Felipe's story antithetically proposes spirituality as a response to the consuming materialism of modern life, Nervo's third novel pushes even further into the spiritual realm with a fantastical story that repeatedly invokes the unique role that literature plays in facilitating the escape from materialism. *El donador de almas*, published in 1899, extends the pursuit of

idealism in Nervo's prose to farflung metaphysical and geographic environments. Through the story of Dr. Rafael Antiga and his encounter with the disembodied soul of a cloistered nun, Nervo interrogates the relationship between the material and spiritual worlds and suggests that literature itself is the product that emerges from their confluence. Antiga shares a familiar desperate longing for the experience of the infinite with the protagonists of Nervo's earlier novels, Doña Francisca and Felipe, but compared to the other novels studied in this chapter, the story of Antiga's pursuit of *el ideal* contains much more psychological, physical, and visual detail. Using a fantastic premise based on the idea of the transmigration of souls, Nervo's third novel shows readers that devotion to the cult of *el ideal* is necessary as Mexico becomes part of a modern international community of nations.

At the outset of *El donador de almas*, the reader encounters Antiga in 1886, writing in his journal in his medical practice in Mexico City. When Andrés Esteves, a childhood friend, arrives at Antiga's home and learns about the doctor's feelings of loneliness and emptiness, he promises to give the ambitious surgeon a soul.<sup>17</sup> Antiga is not shocked by the suggestion, and the rest of the narrative follows his interactions with Andrés's bequest, a soul called Alda who takes flight from the body of a nun named Sor Teresa who resides in a convent in Mexico City. Due to the doctor's prolonged dependence on Alda, Sor Teresa dies, and Alda is forced to seek refuge within Antiga's cranium. Although this odd state of affairs is gratifying for both Alda and Antiga at first, it quickly becomes intolerable. Unable to stand each other, they seek Andrés' assistance in finding Alda a new body. Once the characters consult with a Kabbalist rabbi and Rafael admits that he cannot control Alda—and after Alda's unsuccessful transition into the body of Antiga's servant, Doña Corpus—Andrés liberates the feminine soul from her attachments to the

physical world. The novel concludes as Antiga returns to Mexico, enriched by the experience, but as lonely as when he began the adventure years before.

Doctor and philosopher, Antiga positions himself on the border between material reality and idealism. As a medical doctor Antiga presents himself as an expert in the human experience of the physical world, but as a self-styled philosopher he is much more spiritual and romantic. The narrator reminds the reading public that most doctors are materialists and hypothesizes that at one time in his life Antiga would have likely followed in the footsteps of Robert G. Ingersoll, a famous agnostic orator from the United States whose rhetoric was “full of emphasis and visceral dogmatism” in relation to the materialist foundation of experience (215). But as the philosopher pal of Andrés the poet, Antiga passionately pursues an abstract ideal. In a supplication to Alda he exposes this desire: “Alda, necesito un ideal para mi vida; yo estoy hecho de tal suerte, que no puedo vivir sin un ideal... Mi existencia sin un fin, sin un afecto, bogaría con la dolorosa indecisión de un pájaro ciego, de una nave desgobernada..., ¡sin ti no me queda más que mi mal!” (223). With simple metaphors Antiga illustrates the need for orientation which he seeks in the ideal, non-material world. Despite his success as a physician who capably manipulates the physical conditions of his patients’ bodies to produce health, he does not see materialism as an end in itself. Tortured by the need for idealism, and resistant to univocal materialist explanations of the universe, he explores theories and philosophies in books, even from an early age, which is how he came to be Andrés’s *condiscipulo*.

Antiga comes closer than any other protagonist in Nervo’s novels to experiencing *el ideal*, but his story also ends in loneliness and uncertainty. As Antiga comes to know Alda, readers of his story witness wonderful moments of compassion and love in addition to majestic images of the natural universe, but like Nervo’s earlier novels, *el ideal* remains elusive for the

protagonist, inviting readers to examine his decisions as they hypothesize other possible outcomes or criticize his behavior. Antiga's inability to responsibly balance material needs with spiritual desires dooms his relationship with Alda and the consummation of the Platonic dyad which Nervo called "the perfect intellectual marriage" in *Pascual Aguilera* (168).

*El donador* does not divorce spirituality from materiality. Transcendental experiences in art, religion, romance, and science do not offer Antiga an easy escape from the anxieties of his lived experience. In their initial interaction, Alda explains to Antiga that one of the most tangible consequences of her accompaniment is that "[e]stando yo a tu lado, no habrá dolencia que no diagnostiques con acierto, que no cures con habilidad, menos aquellas que fatalmente estén destinadas a matar" (205). Alda repeatedly reminds Antiga that soul and body symbiotically produce lived experience, and Alda's need to reside in a corporal receptacle is the kernel of several urgent moments in the novel's plot. But when Alda begins to reside in Antiga's brain, her memories from her life as Sor Teresa do not accompany her. Assuming that some readers may find her amnesia odd, the narrator explains that it is "muy explicable atendiendo a que la fantasía no es potencia del alma sino una facultad material que se queda en la tumba" (214). Antiga wants to know everything about Alda, but her embodied experience as Sor Teresa is off-limits because the body participates in physical reality, and those experiences are specific to the body. When Antiga's indefatigable desire to see Alda causes Sor Teresa's body to fail, the tragic tone of the scene reminds readers that the physical body should not be neglected in favor of spiritual wellness. Antiga forgets this reality, but the narrator signals his mistake to readers and reiterates that experiences in the real world are meaningful. Unable to recognize this fact, Antiga commits himself to a series of actions that alienate Alda and return him to a state of loneliness at the conclusion of the novel.

Daniel Cottom has observed that the task of the nineteenth-century European novel was “to show society to itself, unified and whole and comprehensible, within the figure of the individual” (126). Nervo appears to have interpreted this task in an original way, questioning what exactly constituted the individual through a tense representation of platonic dualism. Sexual tones and images in *El donador* provocatively focused the exploration of the relationship between materiality and idealism for the *fin del siglo* Mexican audience. Historians and cultural critics have thoroughly documented the obsession with the control of sexuality and gender roles at the end of the nineteenth century in Mexico, particularly in discourses related to public health and criminality.<sup>18</sup> And though the sexual imagery in *El donador* is not as graphically explicit, or violent, as in Nervo’s previous novels, it is much more complicated, and certainly threatened the clear lines of “appropriate behavior” that Porfirian politicians and reformers desired to create in their vision of modernized Mexico.

Writing about Nervo’s novels, Irwin has observed that “Biological sex is a troubling theme for Nervo. He seems comfortable with neither heterosexuality nor homosexuality and prefers to obliterate sexual difference in any way possible” (100). Being comfortable with homosexuality was hardly an option in Porfirian Mexico, but homoeroticism is certainly part of Antiga’s relationship with Estevez. They form a complementary dyad based on their characteristic opposition: “Andrés era pobre y Rafael era rico. Andrés era poeta y Rafael era filósofo. Andrés era rubio y Rafael era moreno” (212). And at the outset of the novel, when Esteves approaches Antiga with his offer of a gifted soul, he remarks that “Todo hombre necesita un hombre,” to which the doctor replies, “Y a veces una mujer” (201). Karen Poe, supporting a similar position to Irwin’s, reads the erotic tension between the two male characters as a parody of courtly love and conventional romance narratives, and argues that their homoeroticism is a

barrier to the development of Antiga's relationship with Alda (187). Alda and Antiga come together as a result of Esteves's gift, and he is also the one who breaks them apart. The triangular relationship between all three figures does not flatten into a romantic pairing. Even after Alda enters Antiga's brain, their romantic attachment proves to be unstable, and once Alda frees herself from the physical realm with Esteves's permission, Antiga finds himself alone, again. Irwin aptly points out that this fits into the novel's historic moment because "[t]he open ending reflects the climate of discourse on gender and sexuality at the time: crisis and confusion" (106). Unable, or perhaps unwilling, to resolve the sexual tensions produced between Antiga, Esteves, and Alda, the novel avoids committing itself to the traditional tale of heterosexual coupling which either comically ends in marriage or tragically ends in separation.<sup>19</sup>

Nervo published *El donador de almas* as a serial novel in the *Cómico* weekly magazine in Mexico City in the spring of 1899 (Mata 133), and the "última parte" of the *nouvelle* appeared in the April 1899 issue of the *Revista Moderna*. Like many other *modernista* narratives, the novel incorporates fantastic presuppositions and elements to address the cultural conflicts generated by modernity.<sup>20</sup> *El donador de almas* is a literary experiment that anthropomorphically animates souls to move and talk. Though the idea of souls tangibly moving and speaking is quite fantastic, Robert A. Heinlein's notion of "speculative fiction" is a more apt descriptor of *El donador* because the novel employs theories and concepts that intellectuals used to explain natural phenomena in turn-of-the-century Mexico. Heinlein defined speculative fiction in negative terms, rejecting the inclusion of fantasy within its parameters: "it rules out the use of anything as material which violates established scientific fact, laws of nature, call it what you will, i.e., it must [be] possible to the universe as we know it."<sup>21</sup> No doubt inviting ire from Heinlein literalists, I read *El donador* as speculative, and not merely fantastic, because the story

of the transmigration of Alda's soul is presented in such clear scientific discourse and evokes spiritualist beliefs that, for many intellectuals in Porfirian Mexico, described and predicted events in the observable world.<sup>22</sup>

The theosophical concept of the transmigration of souls, an idea found in Pythagorean and neo-Platonic philosophies, makes the ethereal world of *El donador de almas* tangible and recognizable in a way that supports Nervo's spiritualist position in the Porfirian literary dispute over materialism.<sup>23</sup> This position is also ironically supported by scientific language and images that treat Alda's soul and her experiences as if they are extensions of the physical universe. Nervo's curiosity and eclectic arrangement of scientific and spiritual ideas brought Brushwood to conclude that "Every piece of information seemed to move him to speculation, with the human condition always the laboratory" (147). Gloria Meléndez notes that *El donador de almas* "has certain elements of science fiction," that explore metaphysical and spiritual questions (44). And, as Alfonso Reyes wrote in 1914, Nervo approached science as a form of magic and vice versa, recognizing both as vital forces in Mexico's experience of modernity (*Antología* xxii).

Several parenthetical comments in the text directly address the attitudes and assumptions held by the audience of implied readers, offering the narrator of the novel the opportunity to anticipate and respond to potential criticisms from his detractors. His familiar and confrontational tone suggests familiarity with the critical environment that had been upset by *El bachiller*, and his comments explicitly justify the specific narrative choices that shape the form and content of *El donador de almas*. About halfway through the novel, the narrator refers to Antiga as "*nuestro héroe*" (original emphasis), before self-consciously interjecting: "(clisé que todos los novelistas usan para designar al personaje principal de sus novelas)" (216). Separating the role of the protagonist of the story from assumed notions of heroism reminds readers that not all



protagonists are heroes, and that stories about flawed—or even ordinary—individuals have a place in the literary canon. The narrator's refusal to submit to formal and social conventions within the narrative challenged literary practices in the Porfiriato by shifting power to the individual author's creative achievement and away from the work's evaluation within a rigid framework of literary expectations guided by tradition and institutional authority. Directly addressing readers allows the narrator of *El donador* to lampoon practices that he finds cliché or antiquated, but his argument does not challenge tradition with tradition, or institutional power with institutional power. Instead, the creative act itself—the writer's conscious decision-making process—becomes the engine for literary innovation. The narrator uses his discriminating stylistic choices to offer a different view of the representation of Mexican speech patterns in literature when Alda occupies the left hemisphere of Antiga's brain. Joined together in an intracranial dialogue, the narrator explains his distaste for the literary conventions that mimetically reproduce the sounds and forms of Mexican Spanish in text. Expressing his opinion with verbs in the *nosotros* form, his explanation is also a discursive message that almost imperceptibly invites readers to adjust their expectations and adopt the narrator's view:

El español surgía flúido y acariciador, con todas las melodías de los diminutivos mexicanos, con toda la expresión de los superlativos, con toda la opulencia de los verbos; y si resistimos a copiar uno de esos eróticos parlamentos, uno de esos tiernos paliques, es porque siempre hemos creído que los diálogos pasionales no deben escribirse sino con notas en el pentagrama, para lo digan los violines y las violas, las flautas y los oboes divinos, las maderas y los latones, en medio de la sinfónica pompa de los grandes motivos orquestales. ¡Lo demás es un escarnio y una profanación! (213)

Sadly, the narrator does not transcribe any dialogue onto the musical staff, but his idea certainly challenges conventional expectations that would require characters to use Mexican speech patterns that lexically and morphologically correspond to their regional background and social status. In lieu of mimetically reproducing Alda/Antiga's conversations in the text, the narrator suggests with a beautifully detailed image of a symphony orchestra that language can be polyphonic, more apt for musical expression than textual documentation. Self-consciously challenging other authors who profane romantic dialogue by writing it in an inadequate style, the narrator positions himself as a different kind of writer, one more attuned to the expression of aesthetic beauty and moral action than his contemporaries.

The "última parte" of *El donador* that appeared in the *Revista Moderna* is another textual space where the narrator can explain his stylistic choices and address potential criticisms of the novel on his terms. With a startling shift in style and content, the last section abandons Antiga's story to capture a brief dialogue between two characters: Él, the narrator of *El donador de almas*, and Zoilo, a critic who interrogates the narrator's decisions.<sup>24</sup> Zoilo asks Él what literary school the narrator adheres to, why reference is made to the United States, and why the tale is named for a minor character. The first question suggests that Él stands in for Nervo himself, but Él's character ambiguously stands in for the author. The impersonal pronoun "Él" glaringly avoids the "yo" that many authors used to explain their stylistic choices; nevertheless, Él lays out a view of *modernista* poetics that aligns with Nervo's other writings. Él resists classifying himself as a student of any single school, arguing, through a Don Juan-esque metaphor involving beautiful women named Asunción, Lidia, Elena, Blanca, Antonia and Ana, that perfection can only be found by joining together traits from many different objects or traditions. And when asked about why he alternately provokes his critics or remains silent, he responds: "Creo en la labor y en el

silencio: en la primera, porque triunfa; en el segundo, porque desdeña” (344). Combatively and playfully responding to Zoilo’s questions, Él demonstrates his anticipation of critical responses to his writing, as well as his willingness to address these complaints directly within the narrative. But Él is at one and the same Nervo and not Nervo—he may share the author’s literary attitudes and tastes, but his autonomy from the author questions critical conventions and expectations even further than the narrative asides within the novel itself.

Even while exploring exotic and imaginative locales, the narrator of *El donador de almas* directs the story to an implied Mexican audience. Antiga confesses that he feels empty and expresses his agony through a famous phrase from Shakespeare’s *Richard III*: “¡Mi reino por un afecto!” he writes at the outset of the entry, and at its conclusion he repeats the phrase, using a new noun to foreshadow the rest of the plot: “¡Mi reino por un alma!” (199; 200, both emphases in the original). Antiga’s repeated nod toward the English playwright introduces his cosmopolitan ambitions; he may not be a political leader or large landholder, but “reino” connotes Mexico in these passages. Just as he is willing to read and reference authors from other countries in order to express himself in his diary, he is willing to leave Mexican territory and travel to Russia, where he becomes wealthy and famous after curing important aristocrats with Alda’s assistance.

Vast horizons of experience open in the narrative: Antiga physically travels to Europe, Alda’s disembodied soul explores the Solar System, and Andrés introduces his friend to an expert in oriental religions. The desire to experience and participate in other cultures is not a merely literary question for Antiga; his familiarity with astronomy has conditioned his appreciation of Mexico’s singular identity. A confession in his diary illustrates this attitude: “A los venticinco deseé viajar: *World is wide!*, repetía con el proverbio sajón, y viajé y me convencí

de que el planeta es muy pequeño, y de que si México es un pobre accidente geográfico en el mundo, el mundo es un pobre accidente cósmico en el espacio...” (200). Regarding one’s *patria* as a “poor accident of geography” directly challenged the conventional idea that culture could only be formed with uniquely national characteristics, often represented in literature through imagery drawn from local flora, fauna, and customs. Cosmopolitanism in this novel has a very scientific edge. Whereas Nervo’s earlier novels appealed to Catholic imagery as a way of exploring alternatives to material reality, *Antiga* uses an astronomical perspective to distort the idea that geographic differences fundamentally determine national cultures and beliefs. The narration follows suit, turning outwards to the universe with accounts of Alda’s experiences visiting the planets of the Solar System in addition to well-known stars and constellations. “[E]n el universo todo canta” the narrator informs the reader through free indirect discourse. He (and she) goes on to explain: “Nada se desplaza sin producir una vibración en ese fluido imponderable que invade el espacio; ni el grano de arena que resbala del montículo levantado por la hormiga, ni el sol que boga por la eterna línea de su órbita parabólica” (215). In the movement of bodies and souls, from Mexico City to Moscow to the Milky Way, new horizons of material, spiritual, and—implicitly—literary exploration challenge the familiar confines of Mexican national narratives.

Far from celebrating Mexico’s arrival on the universal or cosmopolitan stages, the narrator often points out the shortcomings of Mexican literary culture and production. Brief asides and sly remarks direct attention to the lack of opportunity available to aspiring Mexican writers. The first fragment of journalism about *Antiga*’s accomplishments is from a Mexican newspaper, which the narrator introduces with an ironic comment: “Recorte de un periódico de gran circulación, del año de 1886, año en el cual no había aún entre nosotros periódicos de gran

circulación” (206). And when the narrator describes Andrés Esteves’s entrance to the international literary community, he reminds readers that Mexican writers are disadvantaged in their own country. Antiga edited Esteves’s poetry collection *El poema eterno*, “el cual fue traducido al francés, al inglés y al alemán, y se vendió en todas partes y en todas partes fue conocido, menos en México, donde sirvió de hipódromo a las moscas en los escaparates de Bouret, de Budin, y de Buxó, las tres *bes* de donde, como de tres pares de argollas, se ase la pobre esperanza de lucro de nuestros autores” (212). Accompanying this lament about the quality of Mexico’s literary readership—an ironic gesture given his attention to an implied audience of literary elites—is an indictment of Mexico’s idealized national identity. The narrator initiates his challenge in a description of Doña Corpus, Antiga’s housekeeper: “Doña Corpus estaba empeñada en que se acabara el mundo cuanto antes. Era su ideal, el ideal que iba y venía a través de su vida de quintañona sin objeto” (203). After noting her evening prayer rituals, the narrator addresses the reading public directly to confront their anticipated reaction: “Suplicamos al lector que no censure a doña Corpus, en nombre de la libertad de ideas que constituyen la presea más valiosa de nuestro moderno orden social. El ama de llaves no calculaba con su ideal ninguno de los artículos de la Constitución del 57; no vulneraba los derechos de tercero” (200). How could there only be one kind of ideal, the narrator brusquely asks his readers, when Doña Corpus believes so strongly that the world is going to end? As he defends her from the anticipated reactions of the reading public, the narrator signals that dogmatic belief in the liberal ideals enshrined in the Mexican Constitution of 1857 has ironically closed his readers’ minds to the free-thinking practices that the narrator associates with the “modern social order.” Ignorant of these conflicts, Doña Corpus continues to pray for Antiga, blaming the Mexican Masons for his spiritual and psychological pain (217). It would be difficult to deny that the reactions to *El*

*bachiller* demonstrated that readers and critics preferred to judge literature based on external sets of values, especially natural law, which may explain why the narrator of *El donador* mindfully challenges readers to suspend their assumptions to accept a more individualized notion of idealism.

Reading *El donador de almas* alongside *El bachiller* and *Pascual Aguilera* reveals the rich texture of Nervo's cult of *el ideal*: Catholic spirituality, theosophy, astronomy, and belief in the edifying force of literature create a vivid and eclectic mosaic of belief that challenge the conventions of Mexican literature and morality in the 1890s. All of Nervo's protagonists recognize the value of *el ideal* and strive toward it in their way, but their efforts never become programmatic or didactic for the reading public. In this way Nervo defended the artistic liberties and abilities of his generation, the *modernistas*, as they confronted a cultural establishment with very fixed and staid ideas of literary convention that supported a traditional view of Mexican society.

Unexpected twists, abrupt and violent climaxes, and narrative circularity accentuate moral dilemmas in Nervo's fiction as he developed his understanding of *el ideal*. These stylistic innovations also highlight the unpredictable outcomes of the protagonists' decisions. Choice and free will in Nervo's writing challenged literary conventions that had guided many characters in Mexican novels through determined moral and social orders. *El ideal* was an orientation point for characters and readers who confront serious spiritual crises, but its meaning and specific referent were imprecise. Nervo explored various spiritual traditions and practices as he charted his characters' routes toward personal fulfillment, demonstrating that literature itself played an essential role in the understanding of the moral and spiritual idealism that *el ideal* aspired to signify.

Responding to chastisements of *modernista* style, Nervo summoned the cult of *el ideal* as a justification not only for pursuing new and different styles, but also uniting the variegated styles of Mexico's young writers under a single name: *modernismo*. The conflict between the *modernistas* and more conservative critics was never more pronounced than in the 1898 debate prompted by Salado Álvarez's inflammatory review of Olaguíbel's poetry collection. Salado Álvarez exchanged arguments with Nervo, José Juan Tablada, and Jesús Valenzuela for several weeks, clearly preferring to dialogue publically with Nervo, whose letters demonstrated respectful decorum, unlike those of his compatriot Tablada.<sup>25</sup> Nervo's responses to Salado Álvarez's statements not only reveal a fierce commitment to the aesthetic ideals staked out by *modernismo*, they also illustrate the deeply personal nature of these debates. Fencing metaphors are scattered throughout many of the articles, reminding the personal and public audiences that journalism and writing had not escaped the code of honor upon which the Mexican public sphere took shape.<sup>26</sup>

Even before Salado Álvarez contemptuously accused the *modernistas* of writing imitative literature that the majority of Mexicans could not understand, Nervo publically revealed his discomfort with the claim that literature should mold itself to the tastes, interests, and abilities of the average reader. The *modernistas* saw themselves as a literary vanguard disconnected from most of their Mexican peers, as Nervo himself explained in a column in 1896 in which he argued that authors should not be manacled to their readers. "En general, en México se escribe para los que escriben" he argued, invoking the names of Mexico's most famous *hombres de letras*, including Guillermo Prieto, Manuel Payno, José Tomás de Cuéllar and his contemporary Ángel del Campo ("Fuegos fatuos. Nuestra literatura" 164). Writers should embrace their distanced position, he argues, and society should allow them to follow their literary inspirations because

“Pretender que un literato, por el solo placer de que lo lea un pueblo ignaro, retroceda cincuenta años en cuestión de procedimientos literarios, y todavía así abata su idea y la forma que la encierra hasta un nivel mezquino, sería injusto” (165). Positioning himself within this new intellectual elite, Nervo returned to this argument in his first response to Salado Álvarez and argued that “La literatura, podrá elevar la intelectualidad del medio; mas nunca el medio creará la literatura” (“Los modernistas mexicanos. Replica” 216).

In his public exchange with Salado Álvarez, Nervo also boldly claimed that the *modernistas* continued a tradition of progressive and prophetic thinking in Mexico. Responding to the argument that *modernismo* inappropriately imported European ideas that the majority of Mexicans could not understand, Nervo asserted that the *modernistas* were no more elitist than the patriots of Mexican liberalism: “Con palpable disgusto de la masa del país tenemos constitución liberal; con manifiesta repugnancia del pueblo y de las clases acomodadas establecimos la independencia de la Iglesia y del Estado, y laicazamos la enseñanza oficial, y con ostensible oposición de los mexicanos, poseemos ferrocarriles y telégrafos, y... hasta república” (“Los modernistas mexicanos. Replica” 217). In addition to betraying Nervo’s sympathies for the Porfirian political machine that modernized Mexico by oppressing detractors, this statement also reminded Salado Álvarez and his partisans that the strategic importation and incorporation of European ideas had frequently occurred during the nineteenth century, producing the liberal Mexican republic that Salado Álvarez argued was so distinct from Europe.

The desire to create something new, modern, and detached from tradition paradoxically arose from a tradition of adaptation and rebelliousness that Nervo traces through Mexico’s national history and in Western culture more broadly. Nervo proclaimed that the *modernistas* were part of a biblical prophetic tradition that stretched back to Isaiah, Daniel, and John the



Baptist, men who were marginalized (*extraviados*) but who also used their marginal position to become “the fathers of symbolism” (“Los modernistas mexicanos. Replica” 218). But these liberal and prophetic traditions did not directly lead to *modernismo* in Nervo’s view, because, he asserted on behalf of all *modernistas*, “tampoco tenemos padres intelectuales: nos engendramos a nosotros mismos, desde el principio” (“Los modernistas mexicanos. Replica a Victoriano Salado Álvarez” 255).

As with Gutiérrez Nájera and his challenge to the interpretation of *poesía patriótica* advocated by Pantaleón Tovar, Nervo chastised the Real Academia and their Mexican correspondents for ignoring the value of innovation. Annoyance with the Academia favored the development of novelty within the *modernista* discourse, because, as Nervo wrote to Salado Álvarez, the poetics favored by the institutional critics “no es Americana ni es moderna y que nosotros vemos con el desdén que merecen las cosas viejas cuando no son bellas” (“Los modernistas mexicanos. Replica a Victoriano Salado Álvarez” 256). In 1898 Salado Álvarez was not yet a member of the Academia Mexicana, but Nervo’s prediction that the critic and his nationalist ideals would be welcome in that group was fulfilled in 1923 when Salado Álvarez occupied seat X. By challenging the Academia’s authority on poetic style, Nervo demonstrated the need for a new kind of literary infrastructure, one which required a new way of understanding the writer’s relationship to society.

Once the polemic with Salado Álvarez ceased to fill space in Mexico City’s newspapers, a new literary review began to circulate that gave the *modernistas* a monthly site to convene the cult of *el ideal*: the *Revista Moderna*. And though the periodical founded by Nervo, Tablada, Valenzuela, and others became an influential médium for literary and philosophical innovation for the next decade, it was not free from criticism. Salado Álvarez continued to attack

*modernismo* at various moments throughout the Porfiriato, and one of his closest friends, José López Portillo y Rojas, published a novel critical of the *modernistas* in a series of manuscripts overseen by Victoriano Agüeros, a fiery journalist and faithful Catholic who believed that the *modernistas* threatened the vitality of Mexican culture and society. In chapter 3, I examine this antagonism to Nervo's cult of *el ideal* and the conservative counterpunch that sought to reaffirm traditional notions of Mexican identity rooted in obedience to Catholic dogmas and natural law.

### Chapter Three: *Modernismo*'s Conservative Critics: Victoriano Agüeros and José López

#### Portillo y Rojas

For all of the allure of international cosmopolitanism and the exploration of spiritual and scientific horizons, many Porfirian writers and intellectuals remained circumspect about *modernista* innovation. Believing that Mexican culture should exclusively draw images and stories from national geography and everyday life, these critics of *modernismo* favored accounts of the ways in which Mexico was different from, not similar to, Europe, and especially not France.<sup>1</sup> The French Intervention still loomed large over this approach to literary creation because it reminded Mexico of Europe's imperial power as well as the long history of Mexico's subservient role in global politics. But given that the French added the "touch of universality" that pushed Mexican poets to consider forms outside of their national traditions, the skepticism of foreign influence was shaded with hypocrisy from the outset of the Porfiriato (Reyes, XII, 258). The formation of a distinct, national identity, following the patriotic fervor promoted by Ignacio Manuel Altamirano, was a popular project for intellectuals after 1867. Logically, any willingness to incorporate foreign themes and styles in the name of aesthetic innovation threatened Mexico's nascent nationalism.

Worries about alterations to the projection of a strong national identity and concerns about political change created additional opportunities for debate among Mexico's expanding intellectual community. Brushwood characterizes 1892-1906 as a period of "elegance" in which the Díaz "establishment" maintained stability and enjoyed the respect of international leaders (137). Given that Díaz and his well-maintained regime of political and business leaders controlled most of the intellectual work related to politics, economics, and social policy, no one should be surprised to find that literature was the site in which alternative political, moral, and

aesthetic ideas could be discussed. Though this field of cultural production was not fully autonomous from the political field, it was mostly free from the dictator's direct control. Sustained connections between culture and politics elevated the importance of poetics and narrative style in public discourse, particularly as it related to the projection of "order and progress" within Porfirian society. As I documented in Chapter 2, criticism of Nervo's provocative prose revealed disagreement about whether literature should reflect and imitate reality, or whether it should introduce readers to new characters and situations that arose from the changing social circumstances of Mexican modernization. For conservative Mexican readers, the uncertainty that characterized *modernista* prose threatened comfortable and familiar narratives anchored in liberal politics and Catholic moral teachings.

The growing influence of the *modernista* sensibility within the Porfirian cultural field directly and indirectly threatened established literary values and representations of social stability, provoking a conservative backlash that embraced symbols, tropes, and narrative strategies that reaffirmed the vitality, beauty, and purity of Mexico's national character. In this chapter I examine two of the most important figures in this conservative response to *modernista* cultural provocations: José López Portillo y Rojas (1850-1923), a well-known writer and politician from Jalisco who collaborated with the Díaz regime and with the conservative Huerta regime after the assassination of Francisco I. Madero in 1912, and Victoriano Agüeros (1854-1911), an influential newspaperman and publisher whose fervent belief in Catholic morality fueled a career of political and literary criticism. Both López Portillo and Agüeros used a simplistic interpretation of *modernismo* as a catalyst for the expression of traditional Mexican virtues that, in their view, had been corrupted by the forces of modernization.

Both the *modernistas* and their conservative critics believed that literature and social behavior were intertwined in modern Mexico. Each group of writers assumed that stories and images could model behavior and attitudes for Mexico's reading public. In the impassioned cultural debates sparked by *modernista* provocations, conservatives asserted that Mexico's cultural value flowed from images of the colonial past, including the benevolence of the Catholic church and the routine of peaceful agricultural labor. Agüeros and López Portillo celebrated traditional Catholic morality as they advocated against the shifting cultural norms that shaped the novels of Gutiérrez Nájera, Amado Nervo, and other *modernista* writers. López Portillo's novels defended the interests of a rural oligarchy against the expanding power of foreign and domestic industrial capitalism (Murrieta Saldívar 5). And for his part, Agüeros's religiosity colors every aspect of his journalism and literary criticism. Both men expressed a conservative view of literary value and form that summoned tradition as a guide for approaching Mexico's changing social and cultural circumstances.

Yet the conservative narrative strategies discussed in this chapter are not entirely antagonistic to the *modernista* sensibility. Several points of contact exist between the *modernista* vision of cosmopolitan aesthetics and the traditionalist view of Mexican literature laid out in Agüeros's essays and in López Portillo's novel *La parcela* (1898). Porfirian writers believed, in general, that appropriate moral and aesthetic attitudes could produce a peaceful and just society, and both the *modernistas* and the conservatives recognized that literature was a powerful and popular expression of Mexican identity for both domestic and foreign audiences. What worried the traditionalists about the *modernistas* was the importation and incorporation of foreign forms and attitudes. Mexican literature, they believed, should support a differentiated identity, one that deliberately arose from the country's unique geographical, social, and linguistic circumstances.

Racial diversity was not yet embraced as a cultural resource, though this became an influential component of literary nationalism later in the twentieth century. Concerned by the *modernistas'* literary attitudes, and filled with nostalgia for a familiar moral and social order, the conservative challenge to *modernismo* fixed literary and cultural debates on the question of Mexican cultural identity.

*La parcela* quickly secured a dominant position in the Mexican literary canon and has been the object of substantial critical attention. Given the rural setting and the *costumbrista* descriptions of the novel, readings have frequently interrogated the novel's representation of the Porfirian social order prior to the Mexican Revolution. In order to add a new perspective to this scholarly discussion, I would like to shift critical attention to the uniquely Porfirian polemics of the novel, bracketing the revolution and interpreting *La parcela* as part of the book collection in which it first appeared, the *Biblioteca de Autores Mexicanos*. The *Biblioteca* was a series of books published by Agüeros that circulated a conservative view of Mexican society. Book collections like his were organized and circulated to influence the growing classes of readers who emerged from the expanding public education system in Porfirian Mexico. In the *Biblioteca* stories from Mexico's past supported the publisher's traditional view of Mexico's political and social heritage, and López Portillo's novel brought the collection's politics directly to bear on Porfirian debates about the role of literature in the formation of national identity. *La parcela* appeared as the eleventh volume in the *Biblioteca*, the first of four volumes of López Portillo's work that appeared in Agüeros's canon. In the novel's portrayal of rural Mexican family life and business interests, the author explicitly set out to create a realistic representation of social life and customs as a way of inspiring his audience to make moral decisions that aligned with traditional values.

Before framing the conservative response to the *modernista* sensibility let me briefly explain my use of the word “conservative”: I choose to classify Agüeros and López Portillo as “conservatives” and “traditionalists” (I use the terms interchangeably) to describe their cultural attitudes. In a strictly political sense, neither man was a “conservative,” meaning neither writer advocated the repeal of the Constitution of 1857 nor the reunification of the Church and the State. Both men were self-professed political liberals like almost everyone who participated in the Porfirian public sphere; during the Porfiriato, strict political conservatism was functionally extinct (Hale 138). Though some devout Catholics wished to completely roll back the Reform Laws, they mostly opted out of electoral politics (Ceballos Ramírez 109). Those Catholics who became politically active, or participated in journalistic polemics, tended to reconcile themselves with the reality of the liberal triumph. Agüeros belonged to this latter group. Despite his dogmatic Catholicism, his writings were well received by liberals (Valadés 110). Jorge Iturribarria has documented that *El Tiempo*, Agüeros’s newspaper, welcomed writers from the liberal newspaper *El Monitor Republicano* after it closed in 1896 (262). Along with other writers who were “Catholics, religiously apostolic and Roman without being politically conservative,” Agüeros occupied a unique ideological space (Ceballos Ramírez 109). He frequently attacked Díaz, and was jailed eight times for comments printed in *El Tiempo* (Iturribarria 14; González Navarro 679). In this way he separated his “constitutional” liberal Catholicism from the political stance of more “conciliatory” liberal Catholics.

Cultural attitudes and tastes expressed by Agüeros, López Portillo, and other Porfirian writers maintained the political conservatives’ belief in the absolute authority of the Catholic Church. On this point, identifying these writers as “conservatives” appears to me to be appropriate and necessary. These writers’ “liberal” political beliefs, however sincere, were part

of what Charles Hale has called the “unifying political myth” of the Mexican State, beginning during the Porfiriato and enduring into the histories written under the governments of the PRI (3). In his description of late nineteenth-century Mexican liberalism, Hale identifies several dissonant political ideologies that existed under a unifying banner emblazoned with the word “liberal.” Questions of constitutional authority, presidential power, judicial appointment, educational independence, and racialized science divided intellectuals, politicians, and journalists throughout the Porfiriato. Recognizing that Hale also uses the word “conservative” in his analysis, I would like to distinguish his use from my own. He sees “conservative-liberalism” as the expression of scientific politics, a program that “sought to transform the Liberal party from a party of revolution based on abstract doctrines or metaphysics into a party of government based on practical experience or science” (20; 66). My use of the term “conservative” marks the aesthetic and moral attitudes that ground authority in appeals to national tradition and Catholic doctrine.

Agüeros was one of the most influential cultural conservatives in the Porfiriato due to his provocative work as a newspaper editor and publisher. He helped shape public opinion through his journalism, and in his literary reviews he challenged *modernista* tastes and practices. His blusterous Catholicism and skepticism of liberal ideas initially isolated him from the literary fervor that arose after the expulsion of the French invasion.<sup>2</sup> From the beginning of the Porfiriato, Agüeros recognized that the written word could help shape public activities, and he also saw himself as the guardian of a traditional view of literature that was threatened by Gutiérrez Nájera and his *modernista* peers.<sup>3</sup> In his essays and editorial activities, Agüeros fashioned a projection of Mexican identity based on Catholicism and a strong connection with Spanish culture; he characterized himself as “mexicano en política y católico en religión”



(González Navarro 676). As a well-known advocate for conservative cultural and literary values, his essays and publishing practices reveal his deeply felt contempt for the emerging *modernista* sensibility; due to his distaste for the new generation of Mexican intellectuals, he promoted a distinct and specific canon of literature and history.

I read Agüeros's critical essays in this chapter to outline the moral and cultural agenda of the conservative critics of *modernismo* and especially to highlight the way that his conservative arguments took shape in response to, and in dialogue with, *modernista* provocations. Although he was well known in Porfirian Mexico and praised by several Mexican, South American, and European writers, few accounts of Agüeros's life or work survived the cultural transformations of the Mexican Revolution. Two contemporaneous criticisms of his work, however, attacked the reactionary posture that he adopted in the face of *modernista* experiments and innovation.

Gutiérrez Nájera associated Agüeros with a very rigid, Catholic group of writers who congregated in and around the Academia Mexicana de la Lengua, one of the correspondent institutions of the Real Academia Española that appeared throughout Spanish America after 1870.<sup>4</sup> For the Real Academia, language and literature required protection from the corrupting influence of popular culture and contact with other languages. El Duque Job did not hesitate to paint Agüeros and his compatriots as a small-minded and tasteless bunch:

Don Victoriano Agüeros emprende la defensa de la Academia Mexicana con todo el ardor de un aspirante que hace méritos. Y con efecto, Agüeros tiene en sus 'cartas literarias' que no dicen nada bueno ni tampoco nada malo; en sus biografía de literatos conservados en vinagre; en sus novelas sin sexo y en sus editoriales sin sentido común, títulos bastantes para ganar una silla curul o cuando menos un pequeño taburete en que

sentarse como paje tímido, a los pies del obispo Montes de Oca. (“La academia mexicana” 250)

And Alfonso Reyes, writing after Agüeros’s death, was no fan of the conservative publisher’s politics or poetics either; in an article published in 1912, he repeatedly characterized Agüeros as a man who “sees without seeing” and “hears without hearing.” Alongside the recognition that Agüeros had achieved moderate success, Reyes sharply criticized the publisher for failing to fulfill his intellectual obligation to the Mexican reading public: “Supo Agüeros apreciar la erudición nacional donde la había, pero no supo de su parte acrecentarla en nada, y en todo obró más bien como aficionado” (I, 289). But even through the condescension, Reyes’s praise for the nationalist spirit of Agüeros’s intellectual activity signals a debt that he, Reyes, and the other philosophers, poets, and intellectuals who formed the *Ateneo de la juventud* owed to the Catholic publisher. Reyes’ understated approval of Agüeros’ contributions to Mexico’s intellectual tradition signals an important bond between the two men: a literary project oriented around the production and circulation of a Mexican identity.

Agüeros’s attitudes toward literary activity were, as Reyes implies, almost laughably reductionist. He believed that all literary, historical, and political ideas should be inspired by the Bible, and he repeatedly bemoaned the laziness and decadence that he observed in his intellectual peers. He ignored the substantial innovations and investments in education and journalism that Justo Sierra and his students had put in place during the 1880s and 1890s. Despite these shortcomings, his newspaper, *El Tiempo*, was well-known for having, in the words of Rafael Reyes Spíndola, “una ‘dirección discretísima, criterio elevado y un raro atildamiento en el modo de escribirlo’” (González Navarro 679).

In addition to his journalism, Agüeros edited and published the *Biblioteca de Autores Mexicanos*, a collection of 78 histories, novels, and other texts that formed a canon that privileged conservative interpretations of Mexico's colonial past and favored romantic literary forms. This publishing enterprise and the collection of texts that Agüeros selected had a lasting impact on Mexican literature. Vicente Quirarte urges contemporary critics to bracket their contempt for the conservative bias of the *Biblioteca*, and to recognize that Agüeros's collection pushed Mexico's literary history forward, even if later efforts substantially modified his canon (5). And Reyes signaled in one justification of the *Ateneo*'s intellectual activity, that the kinds of values expressed in the *Biblioteca* played an important role in the development of Mexican culture. He explained that Mexico's national identity could have been muted by European imitation during the Porfiriato, but that certain conservative figures had preserved Mexican culture in a way that could be exploited by the *Ateneo*:

Ayuna de Humanidades, la juventud perdía el sabor de las tradiciones, y sin quererlo se iba descastando insensiblemente. La imitación europea parecía más elegante que la investigación de las realidades más cercanas. Sólo algunos conservadores, desterrados de la enseñanza oficial, se comunicaban celosamente, de padres a hijos, la reseña secreta de la cultura mexicana; y así, paradójicamente, estos vástagos de imperialista que escondían entre sus reliquias familiares alguna librea de la efímera y suspirada Corte, hacían de pronto figura de depositarios y guardianes de los tesoros patrios. (193)

Reyes's lament evokes his comments about Agüeros, a conservative who knew how to appreciate "national erudition." Despite his obvious distaste for Agüeros's dogmatic Catholicism, Reyes's perpetuated attack on the *modernista* practice of incorporating European models of writing into Mexican literature reveals a debt to the Catholic publisher's efforts to

catalog Mexico's unique literary achievements. I will discuss the consequences of this development in greater detail in the next chapter of this dissertation.

The actual distribution and consumption of the volumes published in the *Biblioteca* is almost impossible to discern from currently available sources, but the extensive catalog indicates that it was, at the very least, part of an economically viable publishing enterprise housed within *El Tiempo*. Agüeros used the presses at *El Tiempo* as well as his circulation offices and agents to publish the *Biblioteca*. Sold at the price of one and a half pesos, each book was economically available to Mexico City's working class, but the price fit more easily into the professional, middle- and upper-class economies of cultural consumption.<sup>5</sup> In the first volume, a collection of Joaquín García Icazbalceta's historical commentaries, Agüeros announced that the *Biblioteca* would publish "las obras de nuestros más distinguidos autores (historiadores, poetas, novelistas, críticos, dramáticos, etc.) antiguos y modernos" (434). Among the authors listed in the announcement, Icazbalceta, José María Roa Bárcena, and José Peón y Contreras were essential (10 of the first 23 volumes contained Icazbalceta's writings). Unfortunately, promised volumes from Juan Ruiz de Alarcón, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, and Carlos Sigüenza y Góngora never appeared in the series. Contemporary Porfirian writers included Justo Sierra, Rafael Delgado, López Portillo, and, not surprisingly, Agüeros himself. His *Artículos sueltos*, number 8 in the *Biblioteca*, gathered over two decades of previously-published literary and cultural journalism in a single volume, and articulated the fear and contempt that conservative Mexicans felt toward modernization throughout the Porfiriato.

In the short prose writings anthologized in Agüeros's *Artículos sueltos*, articles reminiscent of twentieth and twenty-first century newspaper and magazine columns resolutely pound a funereal rhythm of lamentations and criticisms; pessimism seeps out from almost every

one of his descriptions of Porfirian culture. A powerful sentence from an early essay distills this anger and fear, the rhetorical point of departure for his interventions in Mexico's cultural conversations: "Es de lamentarse que las ocupaciones intelectuales vayan siendo una mentira entre nosotros: que nadie se ocupe en algo serio y útil, que nadie lea, ni ame la instrucción, sino que todos vayan tras ambiciones innobles, buscando la realización de no sé qué absurdos y necios deseos" (63). Agüeros furiously and repeatedly argued that intellectual life had become bankrupt, so it should not surprise readers to find that an anthology of his writings was one of the first volumes of his *Biblioteca*. Recognizing that the publication of an anthology updates the previously published material even if the original text is unaltered, I interpret the entire collection in the context of the cultural debates of the late 1890s. When Agüeros edited and republished these essays he implicitly asserted that his ideas from the previous two decades were still relevant in 1897, either directly speaking to problems or situations that had not yet been resolved, or as evidence of development of his ideas over time. Agüeros's angry judgments of Mexican culture grow more aggravated, not less, as the anthology progresses. Lacking date notations in all but the last four articles, the collection likely moves from Agüeros's earlier publications to more recent ones that engage more directly with the growing influence of modernization and the *modernista* sensibility.<sup>6</sup>

Agüeros's defense of Christian morality in modern Mexican culture largely focused on arguments in the debates about literary inspiration and national identity that arose soon after the French Intervention. He believed that the Bible continued to be the source for moral purity and aesthetic inspiration because of the high literary value of the text itself: "Ni homero, ni Virgilio; ni el Dante, ni el Tasso; ni Shakespeare ni otros grandes poetas ofrecen en sus obras las maravillas que encontramos en la Biblia" (3). This appeal to canonical texts of Western literature

was not aimed at the multitudinous faithful who filled churches on any given day in the Mexican countryside; it was aimed squarely at the other journalists in Mexico City who were exploring secular sources of inspiration for Mexican letters. Securing his critical approach in biblical belief—the essay on the Bible appears first in the 1897 anthology—Agüeros went on to argue that Christianity was the foundation of social peace and harmony. His interpretation of the imperialist form of evangelization reveals this deeply conservative belief: “Así, por medio de la ternura y del amor, penetró el cristianismo en los países más lejanos, en los más ocultos y aislados territorios: conquistó el corazón del hombre, brindándole una felicidad y un bienestar desconocidos, y uniendo al mismo tiempo a los pueblos de la tierra con el dulce vínculo de la concordia y de la fraternidad” (29). Agüeros argued that Mexican history justified this interpretation of Christian evangelism and that the battles between the Spanish and the indigenous groups were “luchas heroicas entre una religión suave y de paz, y otras llenas de absurdos y ritos horrorosos” (190).

Despite their disagreement over literary taste and style, Agüeros agreed with his journalistic antagonist Gutiérrez Nájera that materialism threatened the moral integrity of Mexican society. As I argued in my analysis of *Por donde se sube al cielo* in Chapter 1, Gutiérrez Nájera embraced traditional Catholic morality and gender expectations in his narration of Magda’s encounter with the corrupting influence of materialism. Agüeros shared Gutiérrez Nájera’s skepticism about artistic tastes that arose from the materialist turn in Mexican culture. He wrote: “sabido es [...] que en las artes ha sentado su imperio el grosero materialismo, y que en muchos de los libros que vomitan diariamente las prensas de todos los países, no hay otra cosa sino ataques a la religión, a la moral, a las buenas costumbres, sancionadas y consagradas por los siglos” (170-71). Literary and artistic practices that eschewed spirituality and philosophical

abstraction did not satisfy Agüeros's desire to create a morally-edifying culture based on his fervent Catholic beliefs. On this point, the rival journalists were in agreement, but their common ground was limited. The indictment of foreign literature in this quotation and the appeal to tradition isolates Agüeros from Gutiérrez Nájera's modernizing view of Mexican culture. El Duque Job believed that literary innovation and the incorporation of new styles would destabilize the materialist culture of the morally corrupt bourgeoisie; Agüeros countered by evoking Mexico's colonial past as the key to understanding Mexico's future. "Si los escritores que tanto abundan en México se dedicaran a cultivar el fecundo campo de la historia nacional," he wrote, "y el pueblo tomara interés por conocer estos trabajos, pronto veríamos mejoradas nuestra literatura, nuestras costumbres y hasta la conducta pública de nuestros gobernantes" (187). The rose-colored view of Mexico's colonial past united Agüeros with mainstream conservative thinking, but it also blinded him to the violence of the Conquest that helped propagate the poverty and oppression throughout Mexico, even at the dawn of the twentieth century.

Social changes brought about by modernization clearly worried Agüeros and prompted him to paint the youthful generation of Mexican intellectuals (*los jóvenes*) that emerged at the dawn of the Porfiriato with dark hues of lamentation. He thought that the young men in the Mexico City press were "[e]nvanecidos profundamente por los elogios de sus amigos, sin dirección y sin voluntad de tenerla, fomentado su amor propio por los mismos que debían reprobalo y corregirlo, contagiados del escepticismo moderno" (176). Without naming any writer in particular, Agüeros explained his abhorrence of the rebelliousness of modern writers who neglected the rules and manners found in Mexico's literary and religious traditions. "El periodismo en México, a mi juicio," Agüeros wrote in another essay, "se halla desde hace algunos años en un estado completo de decadencia, digno por muchos títulos de lamentarse"

(148). The breakdown in tradition and the lack of obedience to authority bothered Agüeros. He noted that every generation of young people was susceptible to moral corruption, but that failures in Mexico's educational system had made this particular generation of people vulnerable to sloth and greed: "El pueblo de ahora es ignorante; pero su ignorancia está envuelta en una vanidad, en una soberbia, tanto más irritante y enfadosa cuanto que carece de todo fundamento" (183).

The Mexican press and literature drew Agüeros's attention because he believed that writing was a powerful tool for public education and for the formation of civic virtues. "La prensa es sin duda el centinela más avanzado de la civilización moderna" he argued, setting the stage for a public castigation of the journalistic practices that he considered decadent (146). Agüeros believed that journalism should be a rational enterprise that used debate as a way of discovering and elevating the most logical ideas. He was skeptical about professional journalists who sold their opinions to the government and routinely accused other writers of laziness and ignorance.<sup>7</sup> These indictments self-servingly supported his own rhetorical positioning in Mexico City's newspaper industry; he clearly believed that accusing others of arrogance and indolence lent him credibility as a discerning critic and as the social and artistic conscience of his time.

As a literary critic, Agüeros routinely fell back on tradition and "rules" as a way of evaluating contemporary work. Hyperbolic fatalism frequently colored his pronouncements. "Ningún movimiento de trascendencia e importancia se observa en nuestra literatura" he wrote on one occasion, comparing Mexico to other—again, unnamed—national literatures as a way of summoning the audience to his position (300). In his resistance to innovation, he frequently claimed that geography, history, and customs should be the source of national literary development: "En una palabra, sobran elementos para dar a la literatura de México un impulso vigoroso y eficaz que la haga salir del estado de postración y de decadencia en que hoy se



encuentra” (308). The words *decadencia* and *impotencia* frequently appear in Agüeros’s description of Mexican literature, especially in relation to the corrupting influence of European tastes and practices. Despite his reticence to name Gutiérrez Nájera or any of his peers and disciples specifically, Agüeros nevertheless rejected their cosmopolitanism and the tendency within the *modernista* sensibility to challenge the institutional power of the church and the literary history that he believed guided Mexican letters.

Positioning himself as an influential figure in the publishing industry was part of Agüeros’s plan to transform public attitudes and behavior. He argued that deficient schools, sites of reinvigorated intellectual activity during the Porfiriato, had produced a generation of vain intellectuals who threatened to destroy the moral codes that, in his view, were the cornerstones of Mexican identity. His solution was, not surprisingly, to create an educational system with more religious content: “En mi sentir, la única poderosa, barrera que sería suficiente a atajar este grave mal, está en la educación, en una educación esencialmente religiosa: ella sola forma el corazón y dirige con seguridad los facultades morales” (158). With the perception that he carried the enormous weight of national morality on his shoulders, Agüeros dedicated most of his adult life to circulating publications that could be used to educate Mexican citizens in the Christian and liberal traditions, reproducing the ideologies and values that he believed would produce productive and well-informed citizens. In a stinging list of complaints about the public school system, he suggested that textbooks needed to be improved, signaling a justification for his publishing enterprise:

La enseñanza que se da al pueblo en las escuelas es imperfectísima: ni los maestros, ni los libros de texto, ni los métodos de enseñanza, ni aun la higiene del establecimiento son a propósito para desarrollar lenta y gradualmente la inteligencia de los niños y los

sentimientos de su corazón: sobre todo, los libros que se ponen en sus manos les traen males gravísimos que después es muy difícil remediar. (184)

Equipped with the religious belief that he had been called to cure popular ignorance of virtues and history in Mexican society, Agüeros set about the task of filling the publishing void with biographies, histories, and novels that supported his conservative vision.

First and foremost on Agüeros's literary agenda was the novel. He believed that the novel's form and the "natural inclination of the average man to enjoy fiction" were a powerful combination that needed to be controlled by the intellectual class (312). "La novela," he wrote, "que por su índole y ventajas sólo debería emplearse en moralizar al pueblo, es por desgracia un instrumento de corrupción en manos de los que la cultivan" (310). Who or what was corrupting the reading public and how are not immediately clear from the context, but Agüeros was clearly worried about what readers consumed, just as he was preoccupied with what writers produced. Even though he approached the matter with a snobbish air, Agüeros correctly surmised that the tastes of Mexican readers did not favor the literary language that he enjoyed. Sensational news stories were very popular in the general public, and even among novel readers, foreign novels circulated more widely than Mexican ones (Bazant 228). Ignoring the low literacy rates of the population in general, Agüeros also lamented that Mexicans were not reading what he thought was appropriate. He believed that Mexico's reading public was "frivolous and indifferent" and that readers' attitudes would have to shift in order to achieve the improvements to the national literature that he outlined elsewhere in his criticism (299).

Agüeros's suspicion that the novel could corrupt the reading public positions him alongside other nineteenth-century intellectuals who were skeptical about the expansion of private reading. Jerrold Seigel has observed that a similar anxiety formed in eighteenth- and

nineteenth-century France, England, and Germany when art and literature began to break away from traditional institutions and sources of patronage.<sup>8</sup> Mexico's public sphere took shape late in the nineteenth century, after the French Intervention, and it benefitted from secularizing liberal policies that wrested cultural influence away from the Church. These policies, officially mandated and enforced by the government in Mexico City threw into flux the codes for assessing—and controlling—the moral and aesthetic value of cultural production.

Although he frequently lambasted Mexican writers for falling victim to literary trends in France—"that pessimistic literature that comes to us from across the sea"—Agüeros eagerly embraced the cultural bond between Mexico and Spain (302). His ardent Hispanism emerges from his dogmatic Catholic beliefs as well as a desire to preserve traditional social values. Agüeros was less interested in establishing a closer connection with Spain as a response to the global power shift toward U.S. imperialism, and much more preoccupied with the secularization of Mexican society that threatened established relationships between the church and the state. Defending his belief that Spain and Mexico share a tight bond, Agüeros wrote that "España, por lo mismo, tiene hacia México especial y cariñosa predilección; porque sabe también que aquí se hace justicia a su mérito, se recuerdan con gratitud sus gloriosas tradiciones en el Nuevo Mundo, y se admiran y se estiman debidamente todos los hechos con que durante tres siglos acreditó su amor y su solicitud de madre" (224). Evoking devotion to the Virgin Mother, the conservative publisher connected his appreciation of Spanish culture with his Catholic faith. His rosy description of Mexico's Colonial era suggested that Mexico should continue to follow the cultural trajectory set by Spain.<sup>9</sup>

Alongside arguments about shared traditions, Agüeros also justified his literary tastes with appeals to Hispanic unity. Unlike Gutiérrez Nájera who believed that Spain was the mother

who “apparently does not recognize her children,” Agüeros believed that Mexican literature should be read as part of the Castilian-language canon (“El español” 99). By appealing to the Hispanic foundations of Mexican literature, Agüeros implicitly denied legitimacy to the multitude of indigenous peoples who continued their regional religious and cultural practices in the countryside, but his argument more directly challenged the writers and poets who looked to France for literary and political inspiration. Agüeros was the public face of the Academia Mexicana during the Porfiriato, the institution that offended Gutiérrez Nájera and other *modernistas* for its intransigence in the face of literary innovation. Unashamed of the conservative posture adopted by the Academia, Agüeros argued that of all the Spanish American *Academias* “[p]uede decirse que es en México el más atento vigilante en la guarda del lenguaje” (395). Gutiérrez Nájera did not see the Academia in the same light: he accused Agüeros and his colleagues of being “Una corporación de literatos que cierra sus puertas a las ideas nuevas y se enclaustra dentro de murallas infranqueables” (“La Academia” 250). Despite El Duque Job’s caustic criticism, Agüeros defended his Hispanist sympathies throughout his career, using Spanish authors to legitimize his cultural cachet in Mexico. He also married a daughter of Anselmo de la Portilla, an influential Spanish writer and editor who advocated closer cultural affiliation between Mexico and Spain in his newspaper *La Iberia* (Quirarte 3). When the first volumes of the *Biblioteca de Autores Mexicanos* reached Spain, Agüeros received laudatory letters from Gaspar Núñez de Arce, Juan Valera, and Marcelino Meléndez y Pelayo, correspondence that he printed in the last folios of many volumes in the series—including the anthology of his essays—as evidence of the series’ legitimacy.<sup>10</sup> Núñez de Arce wrote that “[f]ormar una colección de obras selectas de los más notables escritores, antiguos y modernos, de México, es suplir una deficiencia, que hoy se advierte, altamente perjudicial para la literatura de

ese hermoso país” (485). Don Meléndez y Pelayo praised the quality of the printing as well as the taste of the selection; ironically, both were aspects of the *Biblioteca* that Alfonso Reyes later criticized in his assessment of Agüeros’s contribution to Mexican letters (288).

Hispanism supported nationalism in Agüeros’s philosophy of literature; since the Spanish conquistadors had introduced Catholic values through evangelization, he believed that the virtues ensconced in Mexican history were essentially Hispanic. “Sin temor de que el patriotismo me ciegue,” he wrote, “yo creo que la historia de México es bellísima y que muchos de los hechos que se registran en sus páginas, son superiores a los muy ponderados de otros pueblos, por su importancia y sus interesantes detalles” (186). Bemoaning the imitative style of contemporary Mexican writers, Agüeros often returned to this argument, claiming that Mexico’s past was the starting point for the national journey toward progress: “En efecto, nadie podrá desconocer que para evitar que el atraso, la decadencia y la esterilidad más absoluta invadan nuestra literatura, los escritores mexicanos deberían explotar los ricos y preciosos veneros de nuestra historia nacional: en ellos encontrarían raudales de frescas y variadas inspiraciones” (304).

Agüeros was on the front lines of the conservative backlash to the liberalization of the literary sphere. He argued that his contemporaries failed to live up to the greatness of their predecessors; he accused Mexican society of falling into a state of corruption and decadence as a result of abandoning the Catholic church, and he advocated creating tighter bonds with Mexico’s colonial heritage. These proposals constituted a stubborn refusal to engage with the effects of modernization on Mexican society, and at the same time they supported an alternative view of progress that challenged the growing popularity of what Agüeros feared would become a secular, imitative culture. Telling stories from Mexico’s colonial past, he believed, would allow the nation to *progesar*, to develop institutionally and intellectually based on shared moral values.<sup>11</sup>

Early in their careers, Agüeros and López Portillo debated each other in the Catholic press, and one report indicates that Agüeros attacked the liberal sympathies that his younger peer expressed in the pages of *El Nacional* (González Navarro 676). But by the time that the *modernista* sensibility had secured a prominent position in Mexico City's cultural scene in the 1890s, both men found themselves in a common fight to reestablish Christian morality as the base of Mexican culture. Although Agüeros steadfastly maintained an antagonistic position relative to the Díaz regime for most of his career, López Portillo adopted a more conciliatory and collaborative political stance. As the son of a wealthy landowner from Jalisco, he was well-educated, well-connected, and ambitious. He published travelogues of his experiences in Europe and the Middle East during the 1870s, and ascended into the highest echelons of political and cultural life in the 1880s and 1890s. He occupied appointed positions in the regimes of Porfirio Díaz, Francisco I. Madero, and Victoriano Huerta; served as the governor of Jalisco from 1912 to 1914; and became director of the Academia Mexicana in 1916 (J.L. Martínez 250-51). Such active participation in political and cultural activity at the turn of the century makes López Portillo a difficult figure to interpret ideologically, especially against the backdrop of the Mexican Revolution. In her analysis of Mexican realism, Joaquina Navarro arrives at contradictory, but nevertheless convincing, conclusions about the role that conservatives like López Portillo played in the Porfiriato. On the one hand, she argues, these conservatives supported the goals of "order and progress" that sustained the *pax porfiriana*, as well as the unofficial retreat from the fiercely anticlerical policies of Benito Juárez and Sebastián Lerdo de Tejada (17). On the other hand, conservatives like López Portillo also attacked the regime's corrupting influence on society: "Cuando fue posible la censura abierta, la obra literaria de López-Portillo refleja bien claramente numerosos puntos de antagonismo con la situación social

y espiritual que mantuvo en México el prolongado régimen porfirista” (152-53). While men like López Portillo tried to fit themselves into the Díaz regime’s structure as a matter of survival, they were not afraid to attack political and cultural ideas that threatened their social position or their traditions.

Critics and historians have often analyzed *La parcela* in light of Porfirian social life and the origins of the Mexican Revolution, but I would like in the rest of this chapter to shift focus to how the aesthetic debates of the 1890s, in addition to the support of the novel’s conservative publisher, help explain the novel’s superficial treatment of the social landscape as well as the expression of profound frustration with the political and judicial officials in the countryside of Jalisco. López Portillo’s novel positions readers in a world guided by many of the conservative ideas that Agüeros advocated; it also reveals how anxiety about the dominant control of Porfirio Díaz’s regime propelled conservatives into the *modernista* pursuit of new connections between literature and Mexican social life.

López Portillo did not always align with Agüeros’s reading of Mexican society, but on the question of correcting Mexico’s storytelling practices, the two Catholics shared sympathies. “Conviene que nuestra literatura sea nacional en todo lo posible,” López Portillo wrote in the prologue to *La parcela* in 1898: “esto es, concordante con la índole de nuestra raza, con la naturaleza que nos rodea y con los ideales y tendencias que de ambos factores se originan” (5). Departing from Agüeros’s fascination with the past, López Portillo believed that Mexico’s literary vitality could emerge from stories about the present. He also challenged metropolitan narratives that falsely imagined Mexico City as an extension of Paris; instead, he urged writers to engage more directly with the indigenous and mestizo elements of the Mexican people: “Dominados por la magia de los libros europeos, nuestros poetas y novelistas hacen poesías y

novelas de puro capricho, sobre asuntos extraños a la realidad de nuestra vida y de nuestras pasiones actuales, produciendo así creaciones falsas” (6).<sup>12</sup> Conceding that cosmopolitanism was not inherently problematic, López Portillo believed that an exclusive focus on Mexico’s national issues could deform literature and convert it into “depleted patriotic literature” (5). By acknowledging that most artistic matters were cosmopolitan and not sovereign to one nation, he sidestepped the frontal assault on the *modernistas* and subtly invited them to recognize that the pursuit of beauty could follow a path through Mexico’s geography and past: “La belleza es múltiple y brilla por donde quiera, hasta en el estado primitivo, hasta en los paisajes más tristes y estériles” (7).

Pivoting around the more direct cosmopolitan/nationalist debate, López Portillo used realist narrative techniques to confront the *modernista* fascination with modern uncertainties. Realism in *La parcela* expresses *costumbrista* narrative techniques and challenges the *modernistas*’ distaste for materialism, interrogating their efforts to reposition writers as the only arbiters of morality and aesthetics in Mexican society.<sup>13</sup> As I have shown in my readings of Gutiérrez Nájera and Nervo, the *modernistas* felt threatened by the corruption of spiritual and artistic values, which they associated with bourgeois materialism and the growing influence of commercial interests in art and literature. Both men felt that by rejecting materialism they would be free to explore new forms and ideas, and while some Porfirian writers associated *modernismo* with excessive Francophilia, the *modernistas* themselves believed that their innovations unlocked new ways of exploring Mexican society through literature. Gutiérrez Nájera and his literary disciples positioned themselves as outsiders who could direct Mexico’s social attitudes and practices like a new clerical order. López Portillo conceded that the *modernistas* had appropriately identified the cosmopolitan nature of literary beauty and that excessive patriotism



(Gutiérrez Nájera's original target in his rejection of materialism) threatened to reduce the vitality of Mexican letters. However, López Portillo, like Agüeros, believed that Mexico's writers needed to speak more directly to the reading public's lived experience.

In the prologue to *La parcela*, López Portillo outlined a description of authorial responsibility that emphasized documenting and portraying the diverse cultural practices of Mexico. Through this approach to writing, he argued, "un gran pueblo" ("a great people") could be amalgamated from the disparate cultural characteristics of Mexico's chaotic cultural modernization. López Portillo described the modernization process as "the transition that we continue to make" (8). *La parcela* presented Porfirian readers with a predictable narrative that affirmed the clarity that Catholic morals could provide characters in conflict. Elías Palti, an historian of Mexican political discourse, argues that literary realism, itself a product of political discourses, "allows [writers] to *create* social relations that can be substituted for real ones" (413-14, original emphasis). Whereas the *modernista* narratives discussed in Chapters 1 and 2 sketch characters who confront uncertain moral decisions and situations, *La parcela* reinforces the presupposition that truth and justice are readily knowable, namely due to natural law and traditional Catholic practices and beliefs. Stereotypical characterization positions landholders and politician types in a morality play staged in the rural Mexican countryside and allows the narrative to explore several problems that emerge from industrial and cultural modernization. The conflicts represented in the novel threaten the stability of tradition, but their resolution reinforces the conservative belief that Mexico's path to progress follows a familiar trajectory which emerges from the country's traditional culture.<sup>14</sup>

Positioned within and alongside Agüeros's publishing project, *La parcela* responds to *modernista* narratives by rearticulating a clear and confident vision of Mexican national identity

rooted in tradition and Catholic virtue. The *modernistas* provoked conservatives with explicit imagery and stories of difficult ethical and social decisions, and López Portillo defends his view of Mexican society in a literary work that could directly compete in the Mexican literary marketplace. To this end, *La parcela* predictably reinforces, rather than interrogates, conventional beliefs about Mexican national identity. The realistic style of the novel supports a conservative view of society, and the sharply critical characterization of a Francophile character expresses the conservative's disgust with cosmopolitan *modernista* tastes.

Even though López Portillo believed that *La parcela* was the product of objective observation of rural customs, the characters and situations are transparently staged and stereotyped, revealing a strong *costumbrista* residue in the narrative.<sup>15</sup> The novel is set among Jalisco's haciendas, a region that supported vast agricultural production, particularly after locomotives opened markets for cattle, sugar, and tequila at the end of the century.<sup>16</sup> The protagonist of the novel, Don Pedro Ruiz, is a benevolent *hacendado* who successfully builds a sizable estate "by the force of his energy, talent, and honor" (17). The plot of *La parcela* follows the development of familial enmity between Don Pedro and Don Miguel Díaz, a rival *hacendado* who demands in a dramatic opening scene that Don Pedro surrender a piece of land that borders their two estates. The disagreement about the rightful ownership of the small parcel of land rapidly consumes local affairs, including the star-crossed romance between Don Pedro's son, Gonzalo and Don Miguel's daughter, Ramona. Both *patrones* hire lawyers and pursue the matter in court, though these actions do not prevent violence from erupting between their hired hands out in the fields or on the streets of the small municipality, Citala. Don Pedro and Don Miguel are *patrones* of powerful families, but their conflict also spreads into local politics, where they represent divergent interests among the local wealthy elites. The ensuing political intrigue

ensnares most of the residents of the valley, both rich and poor. As the land dispute imbroglio becomes more acute and violent, armed militias made up of the loyal *peones* mount guerilla attacks in service to their *patrones*. And when representatives of both the Church and the Law intervene, the novel's stage is full of a diverse cast of social positions and actors. The rift between the two men almost tears the entire community apart, but Don Pedro's mercy and charity resolve the conflict in the final moments of the novel, restoring peace to the region and ensuring a happy marriage between Ramona and Gonzalo. Brushwood's judgment of the novel sums up a consensus of *La parcela*'s representation of *hacienda* life: "López Portillo's main purpose was to show how men can get along with each other, and the general impression left by the novel is of a happier society than was probable at the time" (144).<sup>17</sup> Though many images of the novel evoke the rustic beauty of the Jalisco countryside, the narrative itself does not merely chronicle observations of local customs and behaviors; it projects a specific set of moral values onto the Mexican landscape.

Moving between the hacienda, the *pueblo*, and the metropolis, the narration elevates the moral superiority of the countryside over the corrupt environment of the city. This trope clearly positions *La parcela* in a firm conservative position in relation to *modernismo* and modernization. The city is the space of book-learning and politics, but the *campo* is the space of action and hard work. Both are sites of power: the law ostensibly rules in the city while violent force can dictate behavior in the countryside. But Don Pedro's suspicion of the urban virtues prejudices the narrative, directing the implicit reader to look at rural life for models of right-living. Don Pedro may maintain a residence in Citala and have close contacts in Guadalajara, but he is steadfastly a man of the country. As the novel progresses, his interactions with city-dwellers reveal the tension between what he sees as the straight forward life of the *campo* and

the intrigue of urban life. Don Miguel's political influence appears to control the levers of power in Citala, and it is through the lawyers, judges, and politicians that he hopes to capture the parcel of land that separates his hacienda from Don Pedro's. The city thus becomes a dangerous space of corruption, not for an individual's physical body, but rather for the soul.<sup>18</sup>

The *campo/city* opposition is one of the most common tropes in nineteenth-century Spanish American fiction, not only due to the obvious schism between the power of metropolitan politics and rural economic production, but also due to the stereotype of rural barbarism that emanated from urban intellectuals. In Mexico, the *modernistas* directed most of their attention to the rapid changes that could be observed on the city streets and in the institutions of metropolitan life. *La parcela*, by contrast, continues a long tradition of novels about the Mexican countryside that represent the cultural values of hacienda life. Alongside authors like Altamirano and Delgado—works by both men also appeared in the *Biblioteca de Autores Mexicanos*—López Portillo used the *campo/city* binary to describe an idealized society in which all citizens played specific and essential roles that supported economic development and public tranquility.

The narrative structure of *La parcela* invests in the storyteller—the narrator—the power to subjectively interpret the events associated with Don Pedro and Don Miguel's territorial dispute. The narration of the familial drama follows chronologically with several extended pauses in which the narrator inserts physical descriptions of characters and landscapes. The narrator is an omniscient, omnipresent figure, a “chatty author” who often explicitly communicates his detailed familiarity with the story, the characters, and the expectations of his readers. Frequent interruptions in the narrative explicitly direct the reader's attention from one aspect of the story to another, drawing attention to the narrator's presence and his control of the narration, a typical feature of many nineteenth-century narratives in Western fiction.<sup>19</sup> At the

beginning of the novel, for example, after Don Miguel presents his initial challenge to Don Pedro, the narrator interrupts a description of Don Pedro's physical reaction with a detailed aside in which he describes the appearance and reputation of both men. Or later in the novel the narrator's colloquial tone accompanies a shift in the narrated action from one space to another: "Dejemos a los gendarmes y a Gonzalo guarecerse bajo los árboles del camino, mientras pasa la tempestad, y volvamos a la hacienda del Palmar, donde a aquellas hora se realizaban sucesos de importancia" (353). Controlling the time and space of the narration is a powerful tool for the realist narrator of *La parcela* because he can direct the reading public's attention to specific events that represent the view of society that he would like to appear most "real."

One consequence of the narrator's resolute presence and authority in the novel is the diminished psychological complexity of the characters. Before *La parcela*, Gutiérrez Nájera, Nervo, and other *modernista* writers had introduced literary subjectivities in their fictions that were more complex emotional and moral than those that other Mexican writers had previously produced. But instead of recounting the story from the limited perspective of an anguished protagonist like the *modernistas*—Gonzalo certainly would have worked well—the narrator adopts a more fluid and panoramic perspective. Deliberately ignoring the feelings of doubt and uncertainty that his characters may feel, the narrator observes and assesses human actions based on his experience and clear attachment to the Catholic faith, validating the assumptions about social value and morality that he shares with his implicit reader. In this way *La parcela* traces the contours of an expansive social environment according to a well-defined conservative moral agenda.

Realism and fidelity to familiar circumstances is the foundation of *La parcela*'s intervention in the literary and political debates of the 1890s. López Portillo argued to his

reading public in the prologue of the novel that foreign aesthetic influences should be avoided because Mexicans “possess [...] thousand of ideas worthy of being observed, and which can serve as inspiration for singing romantic, tragic, and jubilant stories with the humming tones of life and truth” (7). Nevertheless, examples of local vocabulary and pronunciation in the novel, in addition to the lengthy descriptions of the Jalisco’s geography, have often left Mexican readers and critics dissatisfied with the author’s attempts at representing local color. Mariano Azuela argued after the Revolution that “*La parcela* es una novela de académico modelo” because “[p]or más que su autor pretende hacernos creer que tiene sus ojos puestos en la vida mexicana, no logra apartarlos de las novelas realistas de moda al día, especialmente en España” (149). And writing in the 1950s, Navarro amplified Azuela’s distaste for the lack of realism in the novel: “En *La parcela* no se reconocen los campesinos mexicanos (ni mucho menos de Jalisco), ni siquiera como seres apegados a la tierra en general” (164). Both critics point to the scant presence of *mexicanismos* in the novel in addition to the regrettable lack of difference represented in the speech patterns of the *patrones* and the *peones*.

*La parcela* may not capture the beauty of the Mexican countryside nor the despair of the rural poor in photographic and psychological detail, but the characters are easily recognizable within the novel’s representation of Porfirian Mexico. Recognizing that realism in narrative developed over time, and that the psychological and even pathological detail associated with big-“R” Realism is a product of nineteenth-century Europe, I suggest that the typification of characters in *La parcela* is a deliberate narrative strategy deployed to shift readers’ attention toward the desire for social peace and away from the thoughtful examination of individual experiences of moral and intellectual torment. Robert Scholes, James Phelan, and Robert Kellogg remind readers in the second edition of *The Nature of Narrative* to approach

characterization with historical imagination and sensitivity (92). Characters, they argue, can be illustrative, representational, or, as is often the case, a mixture of both (84-89). Their terminology usefully distinguishes between illustrative characters, those figures that are actually “fragments of the human psyche masquerading as whole human beings,” and representational characters who realistically reproduce thought-processes and decisions that readers could reasonably associate with a living person (88). In *La parcela* the characters are much more illustrative than representational: clear moral distinctions between Don Pedro and Don Miguel are symbolically supported by their styles of dress; single characters stand in for the diverse social positions in the Porfirian economy, and the narrator ascribes specific, inflexible, and predictable motivations to the entire cast.

López Portillo was obviously more concerned with describing large social forces than he was with plotting any specific individual's experience.<sup>20</sup> Illustrative characters usefully direct readers' attention to broad social questions because they gesture toward other systems of meaning. Scholes, Phelan, and Kellogg remind readers that “whenever we consider a character as a type, we are moving away from considering him [sic] as an individual character and moving toward considering him as part of some larger framework” (204). In *La parcela* the “larger framework” is an idealized rural order in which Catholic values, honesty, and family honor confidently guide Mexico as it begins to experience of modernity. López Portillo believed that his novel could produce tangible social reforms like those found in the works of Harriet Beecher Stowe and Charles Dickens.<sup>21</sup> Illustrative characters make this social commentary explicit, even though Navarro sees the characters in *La parcela* as “exaggerated,” and for Azuela they appear to be “false” Mexican types (Azuela 151; Navarro 161). Though the flatness and consistency of the characters does not inspire praise from critics who desire more regionally specific or

psychologically detailed narration, they do confidently represent Catholic charity and a sound legal system as immutable elements of Mexican social and moral life.

Illustrative characterization unites with the opinionated and chatty narration to create a moral world that is easily understood and predictable. The predictability of the character's actions and reactions in *La parcela* counters the doubts that the *modernistas* raised about morality, artistic value, and identity in their novels. Manichean connotations of good and evil rigidly guide the narrator's descriptions, making the distinction between "appropriate" and "inappropriate" behavior easy for the reading public. López Portillo explains to his readers in the prologue that this moralizing effect should be an explicit literary goal in every novel: "Los exámenes veraces de la conciencia social dan siempre buenos resultados. De paso, en medio de la obra, tropieza el observado con vicios profundos que entran en el cuadro de la narración. Presentados en esta forma a los ojos del público, quizás conmuevan y afecten, provocando en los ánimos el deseo de verlos extirpados" (2). The "profound vices" that appear in *La parcela* include easy targets: territorial greed, mendacity, and political corruption, as well as a more muted matter about which the narrator cautions his implied readers: the Francophile rejection of local history and culture among Mexico's modern intelligentsia. To counteract these perceived threats against the morality of Mexico's reading public, *La parcela* portrays a world where readers can judge motivations, actions, and tastes with certainty.

López Portillo's view of progress assumes that good and evil actions or motivations yield observable results that can clearly be identified and judged. The envious origins of the familial dispute situate the novel's story within a Catholic moral framework where distinctions between right and wrong unambiguously guide the action. Reporting a snippet of local gossip, the narrator lays bare the enmity between the *patrones*: "Decían malas lenguas que esta deshecha



bonanza de los negocios de don Pedro, era la causa de que su compadre y amigo don Miguel, hubiese concebido secreta inquina en su contra” (19). In this rural drama Don Pedro is a larger-than-life hero, a man who, despite his functional illiteracy and humble origins, accumulates vast wealth and commands substantial respect. The narrator stresses that his character cannot be impugned, setting him apart as an ideal businessman, father, and citizen: “Era don Pedro una de aquellas personas que sienten confianza en sí mismas, y logran inspirarla a los demás. Se sabía que lo que él mandaba era acertado siempre” (81). After introducing Don Pedro, the narrator directs the readers’ attention to Don Miguel, associating the other *hacendado*’s malevolent behavior with the corruption of his tastes. The moral distinction between the two *hacendados* is plainly expressed in contrasting styles of dress. Whereas Don Pedro routinely adorns himself with simple clothing (“siempre andaba de negro, con chaqueta de tela ordinaria, chaleco sin abotonar y botas sonoras de grandes cañones”), Don Miguel is famous for keeping up with the style of the time and amassing a large collection of extravagant hats (19). Distinguishing the characters based on their wardrobe not only reassures readers that internal motivations manifest themselves in observable ways; the distinction also associates modern taste with moral corruption while preserving the virtue of traditional Mexican garb.

The scope of the social world of *La parcela* includes a mix of professionals from a variety of national and ethnic backgrounds. Several supervisors help Don Pedro manage the operations on the hacienda where he also has many tenants who, for the most part, namelessly observe the drama in the *patrón*’s house. Counted among the staff is a mechanical engineer named Smith who hails from the United States. Registering the presence of a Yankee in the *dramatis personae* of this rural drama reminds readers that the economic success of the Porfiriato is in many ways a consequence of the knowledge and technological resources imported from

Mexico's northern neighbor. The narrator, however, downplays any impact that the United States may have on local politics or culture; Smith is, according to him, a quiet man who "cumplía su deber con exactitud y no se ocupaba ni preocupaba por ninguna otra cosa" (32). Other local characters include Luis Medina, Gonzalo's best friend and the child of a Spanish immigrant who himself returned to Spain to study. Luis's peninsular accent reminds Gonzalo that he has spent time abroad, and his flirtations with Ramona provoke a duel that almost leads to Luis's death. The village priest, Atanasio Sánchez, is a man of "pure indigenous race" who Don Pedro respects for "su valer moral y la independencia de su carácter" (135-38). The explicit nationalist and ethnic descriptions of these three men highlight one of the principal issues of the narration: who is Mexican? Smith never develops as a character and remains an outsider; Luis Medina stares down the barrel of Luis' anger and earns the young man's trust, strengthening the bonds between the families and securing his honor; and Sánchez's compassion and faith make him an influential leader in the lives of hundreds of people who travel great distance to attend mass in his congregation. The novel suggests that even a Spaniard or an indigenous man can become Mexican with honorable and virtuous conduct that support the peaceful order of rural society, namely trust in the beneficence of the landholders and the charitable role of the Catholic Church.

Catholic notions of familial honor and monogamous heterosexuality starkly establish the novel's gender schema. It would be difficult to justify the claim that the unambiguous expectations for appropriate gendered behavior in *La parcela* arise from realistic observations of lived practice in the Mexican countryside; instead they should be interpreted as idealized projections of a world threatened by modernization. The dogmatic expression of these traditional Catholic beliefs appears most clearly in the narrator's treatment of Gonzalo and Ramona. Gonzalo's virtue, the narrator reminds his audience, is a product of his respectful and

harmonious relationship with his father: “Y como no hay en esta vida nada más puro ni hermoso que esos amores, descendentes de los padres a los hijos, como la luz, y ascendentes de los hijos a los padres, como el incienso; el cuadro de aquella concordia, dulzura y afecto, era por todos contemplado con profunda y seria emoción, casi con recogimiento y respeto” (30). Visual and olfactory images taken from the Catholic mass make the father-son relationship appear familiar and comforting, and the narrator’s suggestion that their filial bond inspires universal admiration is a heavy-handed statement of faith in the Catholic foundations of Mexican morality. And Ramona (or Ramoncita, as Gonzalo thinks of her) projects an image of feminine beauty and purity in everything that she does. Her character seems to float above the world, leaving the most stereotypical *ángel de hogar* to appear soiled in comparison. Frequently lauded for her prudence and grace, Ramona is the embodiment of Christian morality; her presence in the narrative divinely guides Gonzalo and the *hacendados* toward a peaceful and just resolution to their conflicts. In almost all of her dialogue, she invokes the Holy Father, the Blessed Virgin, or both. From Gonzalo’s point of view, “[l]a dulzura y bondad de su alma irradiaban en torno con tan vivos fulgores, que todo lo vencían y sojuzgaban” (47). When Ramona confesses that their romantic attachment will endure no matter the obstacle, her comment inelegantly foreshadows the slight challenge to their love, but also aligns their relationship with Catholic belief: “El cariño que nos tenemos es puro y santo, y Dios lo bendecirá” (101-102). When, at the end of the novel, Ramona whispers the last line of dialogue, “¡Cuán bueno es Dios!” her unwavering faith urges readers to interpret the entire narrative in a Christian drama of struggle, sacrifice, and redemption (397). Of course, the arc of the story was preordained, controlled from beginning to end by a narrator who champions traditional moral beliefs and practices.

For the female characters in the novel, stereotypical representations of gender limit participation in social life. Unsurprisingly, this narrative strategy reaffirms the belief that Catholic morality is the lynchpin of social harmony, a message which repeatedly appeared in the columns written by *La parcela*'s publisher. Unlike in *modernista* tales of women who transgress social boundaries and have to cope with the consequences, in *La parcela* the women are consistently polite, chaste, and deferent to their fathers and husbands. To be fair, the men are expected to be respectful and honorable with their wives and lovers as well, producing a narrative in which unwavering faith in gendered notions of virtuous behavior undo the novel's only romantic intrigue before it plays out. Gonzalo's devotion to Ramona is so complete, Luis's brotherly fealty to Gonzalo so stout, and Ramona's faithfulness to Gonzalo so pure that when Luis's father instructs him to pursue Ramona during the height of the familial tension between Don Pedro and Don Miguel, the reading public could never doubt the obvious conclusion. Luis steps aside and gives his blessing to the peaceful unification of the families that yields a productive coupling between the beautiful and virtuous offspring. Similar to other, more canonical nineteenth century foundational fictions—Doris Sommer cites Altamirano's *Clemencia* as the Mexican example in her well-known reading of Latin American romantic nationalism—*La parcela* resolves on a hopeful note that harmonizes Ramona and Gonzalo's love with the readers' desire to inhabit the social world that produced the consummation of the lovers' affection.<sup>22</sup> Restricted to a purely symbolic role in the narrative, Ramona, her mother and the other women in the novel are purely illustrative, symbols of virtue with whom male characters interact as they reveal their moral strengths and weaknesses to the audience of implied readers.

Whereas *modernista* works were willing to leave romantic and personal enigmas unresolved, the narrator's judgmental statements in *La parcela* confidently assert that Mexico's

Catholic tradition and rural social order can produce the peaceful conditions necessary for the reproduction of national citizens. The *modernistas* were also more willing to challenge traditional expectations of sexuality as a way of exploring alternatives to the hegemonic values that they associated with materialism. López Portillo's response to the *modernista* sensibility in *La parcela* extended beyond the stylistic challenge and directly to a stinging caricature that questioned the *modernistas'* ability to relate to a Mexican audience and communicate meaningful ideas. Judge Enrique Camposorio is the conservatives' stereotype of *modernista* activity, a morally bankrupt figure more fascinated with his erudition and lascivious lifestyle than with local tradition. Portraying the judge in this light, *La parcela* offered readers an account of *modernismo* that challenged the one presented by the *modernistas* themselves, albeit with attacks that oversimplified and mischaracterized many of the *modernistas'* beliefs and practices.

As a judge, Camposorio is at one and the same time a judicial and literary figure, a man charged with interpreting texts and arguments within an ordered framework. Given that his educational and professional background, along with his social habits, characterize him as a cosmopolitan intellectual as well as a corrupt legal functionary, I read him here as a stereotype of the *modernistas* created by conservatives who wanted to discredit cosmopolitanism. Additionally, as an authority on textual interpretation, Camposorio illustratively represents the *modernistas'* literary tastes and practices, and his moral corruption signals to readers the dangers of incorporating *modernista* literature into the Mexican canon. Though Camposorio only interprets legal texts in *La parcela*, I propose that his role can be interpreted more broadly to encompass all textual interpretation, including literature.<sup>23</sup> Literature, like the law, communicates messages to readers, and as an arbiter of textual authority, Camposorio's willingness to ignore black-and-white interpretations threatens the very clarity that underlies *La parcela's* overt

didacticism. To assure readers that moral clarity can be extracted from both kinds of texts, Camposorio becomes a negative illustrative example of interpretive inefficacy that helps the novel justify its not-so-subtle call for the renewal of conservative morals and poetics in response to *modernista* cultural ideas.

Camposorio arrives in Citala at the behest of Don Miguel and his attorney to determine the land boundaries on the *Monte los Pericos*, the disputed parcel named in the novel's title. The narrator is quick to point out Camposorio's alignment with Díaz's interests, and, sure enough, the judge rules against Don Pedro, ignoring documentary evidence and testimony from local *peones*. When Don Miguel celebrates the verdict, he holds a public dance to thank Camposorio—prematurely as it turns out, because a panel of judges in Guadalajara overturns the verdict. Unlike other minor characters in *La parcela*, the judge clearly fascinates the narrator, or at least the narrator decides to share more of his fascination with the reading public. His physical description and the story of his life prior to his arrival in Citala occupy more textual space than the initial description of Don Pedro, the novel's hero. The narrator introduces Camposorio to his readers by distinguish him from the other judges who are “right and true and honor the administration of justice,” citing local gossip about the judge's “dubious reputation” (210). Camposorio does not symbolize all judges, because the narrator considers these men to be essential public figures. But by comparing Camposorio to other judges and reporting negative public opinion, the narrator accentuates his condemnatory introduction of the judge, setting the stage for a critique of Camposorio's cosmopolitan mannerisms.

Camposorio's corrupt character is attributed to his inability to respect local customs, as well as his lack of professional dedication and a penchant for vice that threatens to destroy the honor of those with whom he comes in contact.<sup>24</sup> Most alarming for the narrator is the judge's

obstinate rejection of local customs, habits, and virtues; Camposorio is not a member of the Mexican community, at least not the one idyllically projected in *La parcela*. His cosmopolitan, urbane background fits into the conservative stereotype of *modernista* intellectuals who are more knowledgeable about France than about Mexico. Educated in Europe and obsessed with French language and culture, Camposorio returned to Mexico, the narrator explains, without the desire or ability to contribute to the national community. His lackluster intelligence and skill did not disqualify him during his legal training, and when it came time to practice law in his native land, he failed to embrace the history and potential of his judicial responsibility: “Los estudios, y mucho más los hechos en la República, inspirábanle inmenso desdén” (210). From the outset the narrative forms a metaphorical link between Camposorio’s Francophile tastes and his moral corruption, a relationship that identifies foreign influence as a threat to the vibrant culture and commerce of the countryside that the novel portrays in rich detail.

Wary of Camposorio’s inability to participate in Mexican culture and life, the narrative evokes the Catholic foundations of Mexico’s national identity in a conservative call-to-arms against the encroaching threat of foreign influence. Recalling that Catholic imagery supported the narrator’s affirmation of Gonzalo’s respect for his father, a centerpiece of the novel’s didactic moralism is the message that respecting one’s parents and loving one’s country are mutually reinforcing foundational elements of right-living. So when the narrator interprets the judge’s cosmopolitanism as snobbery and a manifestation of moral vacuity, he emphasizes the lack of connection between Camposorio, his family, and Mexico itself: “Lo más lamentable de todo fue que, en el naufragio de sus principios, no se salvaron ni el respeto a sus padres, ni el amor a la patria: todo fue devorado por el abismo” (211). Patriotic fervor joins with filial piety to guide other characters away from the “abyss” that Camposorio contentedly inhabits. His story is,

therefore, a cautionary tale for readers, an example of irregular and inappropriate behavior that threatens the stability of the local order.

The characteristics ascribed to the judge distance him from the intimate community of Citala and position him as an antagonist to the entire social and moral order that supports the environment of the narrative. Within a system based on strict gender roles and idealized courtship rituals, the judge's self-centered romantic intentions appear to be morally corrupt. Public outcry had already drawn attention to the *modernista* embrace of erotic images that scandalized substantial sectors of Mexico's cultural elite: José Juan Tablada was removed from his position at the popular newspaper *El País* when his poem, "Misa negra," offended readers with imagery deemed "blasfematorio" by Carmen Romero Rubio de Díaz, Porfirio Díaz's wife (Ramírez 262). Camposorio's romantic proclivities evoke the erotic aspects of *modernista* cultural production. The narrator explains that after his parents' death, Camposorio sought to secure his economic future by marrying a rich woman, whom he finds and woos in short order. This woman pours all of her affection into her marriage and into their children, but her energies are wasted on Camposorio, whose cynicism, the narrator explains, "no tuvo tasa ni correctiva, y no hacía más el tal, que burlarse de ella y de su inocente confianza" (215). The cruel indifference that Camposorio expresses in his marriage stains his character in contrast with the loving and devoted husbands and suitors found in the rest of the novel. Even Don Miguel respects and adores his wife, Doña Paz! So when Camposorio's unnamed spouse summons the courage to separate herself and the children from her neglectful spouse, the judge returns to the world of unattached women, shamelessly pursuing a local girl from Citala, Chole, with lustful intent. By disrupting the implied readers' expectations of romantic purity, especially in comparison to



Ramona and Gonzalo's chaste affections, Camposorio becomes a menace that the narrator would like to remove the idyllic social arrangement in the countryside of Jalisco.

Burdened with amoral baggage and marked as an outsider, Camposorio represents the kind of modern intellectual that both Agüeros and López Portillo feared would shift Mexican culture away from its traditional foundations. In addition to disrespecting his marriage vows, he enjoys French food, frequently cites French literature, and peppers his conversations with Gallicisms (239). More than a mere caricature of European taste, Camposorio holds power over the characters with his control of the interpretation of legal texts. As such, the narrator's concern with his moral compass draws readers' attention to the foundations of textual interpretation itself. Watching the judge read a legal document submitted by Don Pedro, the narrator recognizes that despite the fact that "el punto era clarísimo," the judge "fingía buscar nuevos textos" while delaying his ruling, ultimately ignoring the facts set before him and ruling in Don Miguel's favor (244). An outsider, a womanizer, and a dishonest textual interpreter, Camposorio's harsh characterization illustrates the threat that conservative Mexicans perceived in the development of the *modernista* sensibility. Recalling López Portillo's belief that "true examinations of the social always yield good results," in Mexican literature, readers can easily recognize that Camposorio represents several "profound vices" that they should desire to remove from society (2).

The narrator's disgust with Camposorio's decadence couples political commentary with literary criticism. Despite being a minor character, he embodies two important critiques. The first, as I have shown, is directed toward the perception that Mexican *modernista* writers rejected their national history and identity; the second is more explicitly political, and unites López Portillo with other Porfirian writers, including the *modernistas*, who desired to separate Mexico's cultural field from the apparatus of State power. Camposorio enjoys the support and protection

of several powerful politicians in Mexico City, but even they recognized that he was too inept to work in the national legislature, which is why he was sent to Jalisco with strong recommendations for a judicial appointment. Once the narrator establishes that Camposorio's power is a product of political nepotism, his despicable behavior in the *Monte de los Pericos* complaint and under the watchful eye of public gossip becomes a pointed criticism directed toward the State.

Preoccupied with the moral corruption associated with political service, López Portillo joined other Porfirian writers, including the *modernistas*, who viewed politicians, bureaucrats, and functionaries with marked skepticism and antipathy. In many ways Don Pedro's abrasive encounter with local political figures bears a strong resemblance to Emilio Rabasa's novels about Juan Quiñones (*La bola* [1887], *La gran ciencia* [1887], *El cuarto poder* [1888] y *Moneda falsa* [1888]), an idealistic young man who travels to Mexico City, where he finds newspaper offices and fancy parlors full of opportunistic men who are more interested in earning money than participating in reasonable political discussions. Government bureaucrats and judges also appear in Federico Gamboa's *Suprema ley* (1896), a novel that documents several shortcomings in Mexico City's culture of fatherhood and masculinity. Even Manuel Gutiérrez Nájera used Raúl's relationship with Magda in *Por donde se sube al cielo* to indicate the moral hypocrisy of the political class.

While the tendency to represent politics as an essentially vicious practice stings with hypocrisy—like many of these other writers, López Portillo served in the *Cámara de Diputados* and even became Governor of Jalisco—it rhetorically suggested that literature, as part of the cultural sphere, required greater autonomy from the dominant values of Mexican political and financial activities. On this point, López Portillo and Agüeros stumble into solidarity with the

*modernistas*. Ignoring their conflict over the specific characterization of Mexican life that readers needed in order to confront modernity, both groups of writers recognized that cultural practices needed to detach themselves from their traditional alliance with political forces. If, as Palti argues, the novel in Altamirano's time had become "*la forma moderna de la política, el ámbito propio para el desenvolvimiento de la vida republicana*," I think that it would be reasonable to conclude that by the 1890s the connections between the political and cultural fields in Mexico had shifted (415, original emphasis). In *La parcela*, the judge's corruption and his indifference to Mexican customs evidences the need to communicate customs through other means; politics is insufficient to fulfill those needs for Mexican readers. López Portillo and Agüeros directed readers to the institutional Catholic church for guidance, while the *modernistas* looked to art itself as a means of communicating cultural value in the face of a bankrupt political system. At the same time, the political dimensions of the representation of the social order clearly set the conservatives at odds with the *modernistas*, despite their apparent shared support for the Díaz regime. Provocation and debate linked the cultural and political fields as both the *modernistas* and their conservative critics explored how to express Mexican identity for domestic and international audiences.

Steadfast faith in Catholic virtues is certainly what López Portillo had in mind when he proposed the narration of "exámenes veraces de la conciencia social" in the prologue of *La parcela*. While the staunch moralizing may repel readers more interested in a mimetic representation of the Mexican countryside, it does realistically represent a social arrangement that López Portillo believed could inspire his Mexican readers to resist cultural changes brought about by modernization. Agüeros must have left at the chance to include this narrative in the *Biblioteca* because it put into play so many of his own beliefs about the misleading allure of

*modernismo* and the need to preserve Mexico's religious tradition. Catholicism and adherence to traditional values would not only make the world predictable and knowable from the narrator's confident point of view, it would also provide strategies for characters who confront change.

Most readings of *La parcela* have, to this point, interpreted it within the framework of the Mexican Revolution. This approach is understandable given the dependence of the Partido Revolucionario Institucional on the history of the Mexican Revolution as support for their hegemonic control of Mexican political life throughout the twentieth century. These readings generally ignore the narrator's ire with Camposorio and the representations of political corruption, leading to conclusions that the novel explicitly supported the Díaz regime. Though Brushwood and Navarro agree on this point, the claim that faith in the law in *La parcela* reflects faith in the Díaz regime itself appears to me, based on the representation of Miguel Díaz and of the *Ley fuga*, to be overstated. Yes, the resolution of the plot idealistically affirms political faith in the courts and popular belief in the value of Christian charity, but, as I have argued, the novel does not simply reflect the Porfirian status quo. It projects a heavy-handed morality onto the Mexican countryside in a way that implies that the ethical orientation of the reading public, including the ideas that supported the dictatorial power of the Díaz regime, needed to be recalibrated according to traditional values. Does *La parcela* represent a peaceful social order guaranteed by legal support for the hacienda system? Yes. But if the only interpretive lens available is the agitation of the peasantry in the decades before the Revolution, the political debates that inspire the novel's criticism of corrupt political functionaries, like the aesthetic debates about national identity that preoccupied the author and his publisher, are lamentably lost.

The growing influence of the *modernista* sensibility provoked conservatives like López Portillo and Agüeros to publicly respond with literary products that could compete in bookstores

and on newsstands. In the pages of newspapers and periodicals, both groups posed questions about the role of art in Mexican life and the role of Mexican identity in contemporary cultural representations. In response to the new forms and ideas expressed in *modernista* literature, conservatives fervently clung to images and forms from Mexican history as well as a traditional view of a clear moral order rooted in agricultural economy and obedience to the Catholic Church. Recognizing that ideological power could be produced by circulating books sympathetic to his ideas, Agüeros used his *Biblioteca de Autores Mexicanos* to bring Mexican culture to a growing public of readers. *La parcela* was an ideal work to include in the collection because it voiced the need for strong faith in Catholic morality as a tool for confronting the modern ideas, systems, and characters that threatened his view of an idealized Mexican society.

While Agüeros became more cynical about intellectual culture in Mexico as the *modernista* sensibility took hold in the 1890s, López Portillo found ways to collaborate with the *modernistas* at the *Revista Moderna* on several occasions (Warner, “Aportaciones”). Challenging the *modernista* fascination with Europe and pivoting the Mexican literary gaze away from urban uncertainty united cultural conservatives during the Porfiriato. Agüeros and López Portillo, like Victoriano Salado Álvarez—the critic who antagonized Amado Nervo and the other *modernistas* explicitly in the Mexico City Press—recognized that modernity was changing Mexican politics and society, but, unlike the *modernistas*, their response was to cling to the authority of historic institutions like the Church and the hacienda. They buttressed this response by accusing their literary antagonists of failing to understand Mexican “reality.” As I argued in Chapters 1 and 2, the *modernistas* did not reject Mexico as they incorporated new aesthetic forms, religious images, and scientific ideas from Europe; but still, the nationalist indictment against them persisted, even when the *Revista Moderna* provided institutional support and legitimacy to the

*modernista* writers from 1898 to the dawn of the Mexican Revolution. In chapter 4, I explore how the *modernista* sensibility eventually compromised with the conservatives' demand for the so-called "realistic" representation of Mexico, a compromise that laid the foundation for an uneasy alliance between individual subjective aesthetic expression and a nationalist ideology for generations of Mexican writers.

## Chapter Four: The Uneasy Alliance between *Modernismo* and Nationalism in Carlos

### González Peña's *La musa bohemia*

In 1906, a group of young artists and intellectuals struck out on their own to publish a new cultural periodical in Mexico City. In the five issues of *Savia Moderna*, published monthly between March and July, this enthusiastic collection of journalists, prose writers, poets, and artists joined together to share ideas in a common cultural space, much like the *modernista* writers had done at both the *Revista Azul* and at the *Revista Moderna*. In the first issue, the enthusiastic founders of *Savia Moderna* issued a proclamation in their “non-doctrinaire” manifesto: “El arte es vasto, dentro de él, cabremos todos” (“En el umbral” 8). With their energetic entrance onto Mexico City’s cultural stage, they implied that aesthetic movements and schools like *clasicismo*, *romanticismo*, and *modernismo* had interrupted and frustrated the formation of Mexican culture, and that *Savia Moderna* would be a space in which “la puerta está franca a los bellos sentimientos y a las bellas palabras” (8). With the financial support and leadership of Alfonso Cravioto, these young writers—*Savia Moderna* was also “youthfully beautiful” according to the same introductory fanfare—positioned themselves as the next generation of Mexican intellectuals, the inheritors of a mantle passed from the writers at *Revista Azul* to those who collaborated on the *Revista Moderna*, and now, to them.

Even though *Savia Moderna* was short-lived, it set into motion a series of public intellectual activities associated with the group known as the *Ateneo de la juventud*. From 1906 to 1912, the *Ateneo* was a center of intellectual activity in Mexico City and the motivating force behind the formation of educational and intellectual institutions that cultivated and circulated Mexican literature and culture. Several of the regular participants in the *Ateneo*’s activities eventually became powerful and influential leaders of Mexican culture, education, and politics

after the Mexican Revolution: men like Alfonso Reyes, José Vasconcelos, and Antonio Caso. Along with the Dominican brothers Pedro and Max Henríquez Ureña and dozens of other collaborators, these men became, in Ignacio Sánchez Prado's estimation, "un grupo cultural diverso que fue responsable de la formación de varias dimensiones de la cultura nacional" (19). In the *Ateneista* paradigm, Mexican culture needed to be renewed and refashioned by a new generation of young intellectuals. This belief sometimes inspired them to engage in fiery public polemics similar to earlier *modernista* disputes that had shaped Porfirian culture. In 1907, Manuel Caballero, a respected reporter who played a pivotal role in the professionalization of Mexican journalism, announced plans to reinstate the publication of the *Revista Azul*, Manuel Gutiérrez Nájera's *modernista* magazine. In the "Prospecto" for the resuscitated periodical, Caballero unapologetically laid out a *programa de combate* targeting the decadent—read, *modernista*—aspects of Mexican literature. In response to Caballero's brazen challenge to the *modernista* sensibility, Cravioto and many of his peers signed an article that rejected the reporter's appropriation of Gutiérrez Nájera's legacy, claiming it for themselves: "SOMOS MODERNISTAS," they explosively retorted, "CONSTANTES EVOLUCIONARIOS, ENEMIGOS DEL ESTANCAMIENTO, AMANTES DE TODO LO BELLO, VIEJO O NUEVO, Y EN UNA PALABRA, HIJOS DE NUESTRA ÉPOCA Y NUESTRO SIGLO" ("Protesta" 336). After launching their counterattack, the young intellectuals began to meet regularly in the Casino de Santa María la Ribera as the *Sociedad de Conferencias* (Curiel, *La Revuelta* 127). And when an inflammatory pamphlet criticizing the government's control of public education appeared in Mexico City's intellectual circles in 1908, the *Ateneo* seized the opportunity to publicize their nationalist cultural program through marches and speeches. United behind Justo Sierra and Porfirio Parra, Cravioto and others gathered to defend the *Escuela*



*Nacional Preparatoria* from critics who agitated for a more decentralized educational system. By the time the *Ateneo de la juventud* formally organized in 1909, three years before it transformed into the *Ateneo de México*, it had clearly defined itself as a promoter of cultural institutions that could preserve their cultural program and spread it through public education outside of Mexico City's powerful elite. Their efforts culminated in the foundation of the national university in 1910, the vibrant educational center known today as the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México.

When the members of the *Ateneo* initiated the creation of new cultural institutions in the urban metropolis, they positioned themselves as reformers, men who could refashion cultural practices that, to them, felt stagnant. "Vientos de renovación soplan; relámpagos, en el horizonte, fulguran" wrote Carlos González Peña, describing the intellectual climate of the *Ateneo*'s origins (*Gente* 23). The novelty of the *Ateneístas*' position was a critical rhetorical stance against cultural practices that, in their view, felt as tired as Porfirio Díaz himself, the septuagenarian who had won presidential reelection for his seventh term in 1906. For this ambitious group, *modernismo* was both an inspiration and an obstacle. The *Ateneístas* wanted to preserve the formal improvisations and adaptations that had energized literary activity in Mexico, but they also had a clear distaste for the solipsistic and inward-looking tendencies that they observed in many *modernista* works. When *Savia Moderna* appeared in 1906, Cravioto and his colleagues did not take up a combative stance against the *modernista* literary program in the *Revista Moderna*; on the contrary, writers frequently published in both magazines and in some cases the same article was printed by both periodicals. In his detailed history of the *Ateneo*, Fernando Curiel explains that "what could have been a sign of war was really an armistice agreement" between the two publications (*La Revuelta* 96). Despite the strategic alliance that the *Ateneístas*

cultivated with their *modernista* predecessors, one *Ateneista* novelist set out to demonstrate that the vibrant literature and journalism produced by the *modernistas* was ill-suited to the needs of late Porfirian society.

As an influential critic and scholar who participated in the activities of the *Ateneo*, González Peña revealed the strategy for the *Ateneista* intervention in the *modernista* tradition in his influential *Historia de la literatura mexicana* (1928). He identified two distinct aspects of *modernismo*. The first, the formal and exterior aspect, was the incorporation of new poetic styles that bolstered a romantic spirit of exalted individualism; the second was the internal aspect, the ideology and sensibility that rebelled against previous modes of writing and produced a new kind of cultural activity that expressed a distinctly Mexican identity (375-76). According to González Peña, the crucial move of the *Ateneo* was the rejection of the external aspect and the adoption of the internal aspect within their vision of Mexican cultural production. In the *Ateneista* view parnassianism, symbolism, decadentism, and other “-isms” isolated the *modernista* writer figure in an “ivory tower.” Meanwhile, the *Ateneo* preserved the critical stance against positivist science that had initially inspired Manuel Gutiérrez Nájera to denounce materialism (507-08). By separating the formal techniques of *modernismo* from the spirit that inspired the adaptation of these styles in the first place, González Peña and the rest of the *Ateneo* positioned themselves as a new cast of actors on Mexico’s cultural stage that delicately balanced themselves between *modernismo* and more traditional literary nationalism.

González Peña’s assessment of *modernismo* evokes a canonical interpretation of the *modernista* sensibility advanced by one of his peers in the *Ateneo*, Max Henríquez Ureña. Henríquez Ureña believed that *modernismo* was “a new sensibility” that accompanied the “anguish of living” and the “macabre mixture of doubt and disenchantment” that tortured the

spirits of nineteenth-century intellectuals and writers (17). When González Peña framed his interpretation of *modernismo* around the external and internal aspects of *modernismo*, he tried to rescue the term from men like Manuel Caballero who associated it only with Mexican society's worst fears about moral corruption. Even decadentism—the literary representation of the destructive consequences of leisure, alcohol, and eroticism that worried Manuel Caballero so much—helped advance the critique of bourgeois materialism that had inspired some of Gutiérrez Nájera's first *modernista* ideas. And the *modernista* writers in Mexico borrowed tropes and techniques from romanticism, naturalism, symbolism, decadentism, and bohemianism because they hoped to shape the development of their national culture and the cultural formation of future generations of Mexican readers.

González Peña and his *Ateneista* peers recognized that the explosion of literary and intellectual activity of the Porfiriato produced ideological divides. With *La musa bohemia* (1908), González Peña used a realist novel to propose adjustments to *modernista* literary practices that would turn the intellectual figure's gaze back toward the Mexican social world. As readers of the novel come to know the novel's protagonist, Mauricio, the paradoxes of intellectual activity in Mexico creep out of the well-appointed salons and curated writing spaces associated with *modernista* activities. Contradictory desires in the protagonist's artistic development reveal the limitations of two popular stereotypes of the Porfirian writer: the bohemian, aesthetic idealist and the professional journalist. Though both stereotypes frustratingly treat *modernista* literary activity in limited ways—neither accurately captures the life or work of Gutiérrez Nájera or Nervo, for example—both caricatures were recognizably associated with roles that *modernistas* played in modern Mexican society. Like López Portillo, González Peña used character types to examine broad social and cultural systems; at the same time, his narration

explores psychological complexity and feelings of uncertainty in a way that maintains elements of the *modernista* discomfort with the status quo.

The formation and function of the intellectual in society is a motif found in *modernista* fiction throughout Spanish America at the turn of the twentieth century, and in Mexican novels a boisterous choir of intellectual characters welcomed Mauricio in the waning years of the Porfiriato (González, *Novela* 28). At a time when the *Ateneo* was looking for a new way of thinking about cultural production and the responsibilities of the intellectual in Mexico's immediate political and social environment, Mauricio's failure to maintain his aesthetic ideals and sustain a literary career demonstrates to the reading public—likely educated Mexican and Spanish intellectuals, along with other erudite cultural and political figures throughout Spanish America—that new strategies would be required if they wanted literature to continue to play a role in the national pursuit of progress and modernization.

The conflicts and tensions of *La musa bohemia* suggest that the *modernista* intellectual must abandon his romantic detachment, adopt a socially-conscious stance toward his geographic and social environment, and exploit Mexico's cultural uniqueness instead of focusing on the European features of Mexican culture. In the development of this novelized case for a more explicitly national culture—and more nationally conscious cultural production—*La musa bohemia* carries forward a number of *modernista* themes regarding the social world, including the critical stance toward materialism and positivism, the skeptical treatment of bourgeois marriage, the concern with the potential corruption of taste and authority within the intellectual class, and an essentializing gender schema in which women are responsible for moral development in men. The appearance of these tropes within the novel situate it within the cultural conversations of the *modernista* era, but their arrangement within a traditional, realist

narrative accentuates the uneasy alliance between *modernista* literary idealism and the existing social world. In *La musa bohemia*, the protagonist's inability to adapt his writing to the needs of modern audiences is a sign of his anachronism and his greed; the novel, however, demonstrates that a new kind of writing is possible, one which uses realistic, mimetic observation and narration without losing sight of aesthetic and moral ideals.

Even at the threshold of the Mexican Revolution, González Peña was—intentionally or not—oblivious to the explosively violent potential that Mexico's social paradoxes held in store for his country.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, the narrative of Mauricio's artistic life urges Mexico's literary elite to adjust their practices and expectations or risk losing their cultural influence. Despite the absence of overt political or economic comments that could prefigure the violent upheaval of the Mexican Revolution, *La musa bohemia* should be read into the historical-literary moment of the late Porfiriato. In his history of the Mexican novel, Brushwood claims that at the end of the regime the “agony of uncertainty” characterized literary production (*Mexico* 161). Doubts about changing social norms, economic inequality, and, most importantly, presidential succession, alarmed members of Mexico's intelligentsia, and they reacted by drafting strong morality tales designed to calm public uneasiness. Although Brushwood did not include *La musa bohemia* in his discussion of the anxiety that filled the last years of the Porfiriato—perhaps due to his distaste for González Peña's fidelity to Porfirian tastes after the Mexican Revolution—this novel invites the reading public to consider alternative forms of literary and cultural practice that could resolve the “agony of uncertainty” that they encountered in their novels and newspapers. Plotting the consequences of the writer figure's misguided decisions facilitates the exploration of the foundations of Mexican cultural production, bringing the *modernista* pursuit of aesthetic beauty back to its roots and forcing the writer figure to reconsider the premises of the cult of formal

aesthetic beauty. The readers of *La musa bohemia* encounter inspirational resources for literary creation in Mexico's unique geography and society, not foreign contexts or abstract philosophical and theological theories. In this way, González Peña makes the *modernista* intellectual rebalance the dueling demands that patriotism and cosmopolitanism place upon him in a society preoccupied with the development of a strong national identity. By reintroducing a stronger sense of national identity into the *modernista* practice of pursuing universal truth in art, the novel pushes Mexican literary practice away from explorations of complex psychological anxiety and moral uncertainty, pivots novelistic attention toward a more familiar set of idealistic images from Mexico's geography and customs. The novel also challenges the reading public to continue to train the powerful *modernista* critical sensibility on the expanding influence of materialism and bourgeois values in modern Mexico, encouraging them to redouble their efforts against the development of a materialist morality.

*La musa bohemia* relates the story of Mauricio, an ambitious writer whose relationship with his muse, Nita, inspires him to write his first best-selling novel. At the outset of the work, readers find the two lovers living in an upstairs apartment in a house in San Ángel, a modest suburb of Mexico City's urban center. The novel is divided into three parts, each corresponding to a different phase in Mauricio's professional and romantic lives. At first he lives peacefully with Nita, anguishing about how to create his literary masterpiece. But in the second part, after he publishes his novel and achieves a moderate amount of popular and professional success, Mauricio begins a not-very-erotic flirtation with María Luisa, the daughter of his publisher at a prominent Mexico City newspaper. By the beginning of the third part of the novel, Mauricio has abandoned Nita and married María Luisa, moving him into Mexico City's elite business and political center. But as Mauricio's familial connections and ambition elevate him to an influential

position as a metropolitan newspaper publisher, his feelings of self-fulfillment collapse and his aesthetic idealism falls into decay. When his beloved son, Luisín, dies from pneumonia, Mauricio relinquishes his social ambition and returns to San Ángel hopeful that he can reestablish his bohemian relationship with Nita. But in the closing scene of the novel, Nita rejects Mauricio, who walks back toward his home in Mexico City, isolated and estranged from the joyful experiences of his youth. And Nita is left alone with a neighbor family, where she has become accepted as a friend and caretaker for their blind daughter. Mauricio's character arc describes the tragedy that awaits writers who cannot adjust their expectations and practices, while Nita's provides a useful foil that demonstrates the value of education and self-sacrifice for the expanding public of Mexican novel readers.

The first scene of *La musa bohemia* introduces readers to the figure of an aspiring writer-intellectual, a familiar trope in *fin del siglo* Porfirian literature. But instead of a confident and accomplished novelist like the one found in Gutiérrez Nájera's *Por donde se sube al cielo*, here the writer is an unfulfilled and exhausted youth. Mauricio's yearning for literary inspiration, and his doubts about whether or not he will ever discover it, appears in the first lines of the novel: "Mauricio se echó atrás en el sillón, bostezando; desperezóse, y con un gesto hizo a un lado las cuartillas que emborronadas estaban sobre la mesa. Sentía una modorra atroz. Media hora de labor no era, en verdad, para tanto; mas aquel día experimentaba cierta laxitud" (7). The narrator moves freely in Mauricio's world, often using him and Nita to focalize physical descriptions and using free indirect discourse to communicate the characters' thoughts and perceptions. His presentation of Mauricio's frustrations leads readers to recognize that the young novelist's anxieties arise from a more complicated arrangement of personal and social forces than a simple case of writer's block. Over the course of the novel Mauricio's character is represented through

two well-known stereotypes in Porfirian literary and cultural debates: the aesthetic idealist and the professional journalist. Neither position fulfills his literary ambitions. In Mauricio's interactions with other intellectuals, including Nita, his muse, the novel demonstrates that his expectations about cultural production must be altered to create more vibrant and meaningful works. The two stereotypes serve as each other's foils: Mauricio the aesthetic idealist cannot create his art because his devotion to abstract inspiration blinds him to his social and geographic surroundings; and Mauricio the professional journalist cannot create art because the reality of the insular power structure of Mexico's political elite smothers his aesthetic idealism. His despair in both situations signals that, faced with this social and cultural arrangement, the appropriate way forward is a synthesis of aesthetic idealism and representations of Mexico's uniqueness. As Mauricio encounters the paradoxical cycle of intellectual activity produced in his movement between aesthetic and professional stereotypes, the calm and confident voice of the narrator of *La musa bohemia* offers an obvious third way, an example of how writers can construct meaningful narratives without falling into the pitfalls of either stereotype.

From the beginning of the story the narrator treats Mauricio's efforts to isolate himself from the social world with skepticism. Immersed in his elegantly-adorned study in a suburban home, Mauricio deliberately detaches himself in an expression of bohemian idealism. His life and home in San Ángel express his zeal for a cult of classical beauty; pristine natural vistas, an exotically curated study, and the love of his bohemian muse fill his life with aesthetic meaning. When Mauricio stares out the window at the brilliant colors of spring in the first moments of the novel, the narrator observes the bohemian poet's desire to escape the pressures of urban life: "Su amor a la naturaleza bravia, pujante, hacía repugnar las manifestaciones de la existencia ciudadana, motivo por el cual se recluyera en aquel rincón florido de San Ángel" (8). Mauricio



also seeks inspiration in a magnificent statue of Venus that he keeps on his desk. The figurine modeled in animal bone is, for the aspiring writer, “la musa que invocaba en sus momentos de hastío; el hada bienhechora que presidía sus vigiliass, sus regocijos de escritor satisfecho de la obra, sus expansiones de enamorado” (11). Characterized as an anxious poet who seeks solitude and worships classic beauty, Mauricio begins the novel as a stereotypical aesthetic idealist, a writer who believes that beauty comes from universal forms that cannot be experienced in the commotion of a modern world full of people and commerce.

The stereotype of the reclusive aesthete arose in Mexico from the incorporation of European romanticism and decadentism. By the time González Peña and the rest of the *Ateneo* came onto the scene in the first decade of the twentieth century, this form of romanticism, which González Peña called *bohemian* had, in their opinion, run its course and become stale. In the prologue to a collection of his journalism, *Gente mía* (1946), González Peña distinguished the *Ateneo de la juventud* from previous generations: “Ya no pertenecen esos mozos a la generación romántica. Feneció con ella el tipo del bohemio. Apenas si restan las melenas; ha desaparecido la efusión orgiástica. Seriedad, estudio, trabajo: tal es la norma” (23). In González Peña’s view, a more professional, dedicated group of intellectuals needed to replace the bohemian poets and their aloof lifestyle. This view colors the preliminary characterization of Mauricio and his relationship with Nita, his “bohemian muse.”

Given Mauricio’s longing for Nita at the end of the novel, the reader could conclude that bohemia is the writer’s refuge, a lost paradise; but the novel suggests that devotion to classic form and detachment from the world are misguided attempts to find inspiration that are ultimately self-serving. Mauricio believes that his bohemian relationship with Nita, in addition to his hopes for literary success, depend on being set apart from the social and material world that

surrounds them. Speaking to his young lover, he flirtatiously whispers to her: “¡Bonitísima! Eres mi perdición, mi amor, mi musa, la musa bohemia que soñé” (77). The love and beauty that Nita embody produce a disorienting feeling in the starry-eyed poet, and these feelings are more closely associated with dreams than with experiences of physical reality.

Despite Mauricio’s hopes, the reader of *La musa bohemia* quickly recognizes that bohemia is elusive and fleeting. Mauricio’s decision to abandon Nita and pursue María Luisa disrupts the pastoral ideal represented at the outset of the novel. The poet’s longing to return to those days paint his bohemian youth with a heavy nostalgic hue. The narrator explains that after establishing a bourgeois life with María Luisa in Mexico City Mauricio was tortured by memories of the past and that in his darkest moments “había pensado muchas veces que su facultad de crear belleza habíase desvanecido con la musa bohemia, desdeñada, perdida para siempre” (256). Haunted by memories of happiness and fulfillment, Mauricio finds himself overwhelmed by the day-to-day tasks and attitudes of his bourgeois life; the quotidian behavior of a professional, married father replaces the habits of an aloof, uncommitted writer who dedicated his thoughts to art and his affections to his muse.

Setting the novel in a landscape dotted with locomotives and permeated by modern commerce reinforces skepticism about Mauricio’s bohemian sensibility and accentuates the anachronism of his aestheticism. And as Mauricio leaves San Ángel and Nita behind, his old literary ideals fade into the realm of nostalgia as well. Nostalgia here is not a faithful memory or a residual form in the Marxist sense; it is an interpretation of the past, often a longing expressed as a memory of better times. Svetlana Boym writes that nostalgia is “a sentiment of loss and displacement” as well as “a romance with one’s own fantasy” (xiii). Mauricio’s devotion to his Venus and his distaste for modern life expose feelings of loss and fantasy that distort his

perspective of the social world around him. Even as he imagines how much happier he would have been had he stayed with Nita, she angrily reminds him at the end of the novel that he cannot escape into the past: “Mírame, y mírate. No encontrarás en mí a la muchacha de aquellos tiempos, no. Ha desaparecido la que te quiso tanto, la descocada que sólo pensó en amar, y para la cual la vida eras tú, y tú el provenir. No la busques; es inútil. No está ya aquí. Moralmente, murió” (283-84). The reader recognizes in this climactic moment that Mauricio’s bohemian experiences with Nita are trapped in his memory and that, despite his entreaties to his former lover, nostalgia cannot recover the feelings of his youth. Regardless of the protagonist’s longing to return, “those times” are gone.

Even before Nita exposes Mauricio’s nostalgic—and misguided—longing at the end of the novel, his life as a detached, romantic writer subverts his desire to produce a great work of literary art. When the narrator introduces the protagonist at the beginning of the novel, he mentions that Mauricio “sentíase como el pez en el agua metido en su casa con su mujercita, con sus libros, con sus proyectos. Saboreaba los encantos de la vida apacible, del silencio, del amor callado, suspirando apenas en los rincones de penumbra o ante el paisaje lleno de sol” (18). A barbed joke from Nita, however, reminds readers that days spent in bed and in the study can easily be confused with laziness: “Si artista es sinónimo de holgazán, señor predicador de los demonios, no soy artista. Prefiero ser burguesa” (39). Nita’s ironic embrace of the bourgeoisie playfully jabs at the writers’ sensibility, evoking the aesthetic debates in which romanticism and decadentism lashed out against corrupt bourgeois tastes and morals. Mauricio’s muse recognizes that by drawing himself away from the world, the poet inadvertently falls into a solipsistic trap that threatens his ability to create a vibrant work of art. Sarcastically addressing him as if he were

a Satanist priest carries this critique even further and invokes traditional Catholic moral codes to shame him into action.

An alternative model of literary creation and intellectual activity emerges in *La musa bohemia* when the narrator and other characters insinuate that Mauricio's intentional detachment from the real world frustrates the production of any significant literary achievement. In fact, the interpretations of Mexican literature that appear in González Peña's essays surface in the novel when Mauricio and several friends decide to spend a day travelling to the ruins at Xochimilco. When Mauricio travels with a group of friends through the valley to the south of Mexico City, he speaks with his friend and colleague Juan Eslava, whose words evoke González Peña's censure of the *modernistas*:

Lo que no entiendo es tu afán de vencer sin trabajo. [...] No hallas formas porque no las buscas; no encuentras originalidad porque, guiado por la monomanía de perseguirla en espacios imaginarios, fuera de las conocidas rutas, te apartas de la vida. Busca tu obra ahí, en la vida, en la vida vulgar, corriente, ordinaria, y estoy cierto de que la encontrarás.  
¡Ah, si yo tuviese junto a mí una Nita! (114)

Eslava's ridicule redirects expectations about literary practices associated with Mauricio's bohemianism. Supporting the value of hard work and originality in literary practice, he argues that Mauricio's singular pursuit of inspiration through imagination and introspection cannot produce a quality work of literature. The artistic problem arises not from imagination itself, but rather from the obsession with fantasy that separates the writer from the social world. Eslava does not urge Mauricio to abandon imagination entirely; instead, he motivates him to turn his artistic gaze toward lived experience, including his relationship with Nita and "everyday life." Mauricio seems to comprehend Eslava's advice, because he returns home and immediately

begins work on *Dos almas*, the best-selling novel that propels him into the national literary spotlight.

Unfortunately for Mauricio, after the publication of *Dos almas* he trades one ill-suited model of writing for another when he transitions from bohemian poet to professional newspaperman. Following many influential Porfirian writers, including Manuel Gutiérrez Nájera and Victoriano Agüeros, *La musa bohemia* perpetuates a skeptical stance toward the integrity and social value of journalism. The novel's representation of journalists builds on other Porfirian novels that explored the burgeoning class of reporters, editors, and aspiring artists who populated the newspaper industry of the Porfiriato. Emilio Rabasa's *El cuarto poder* and *La moneda falsa* (1888) follow the career of Juan Quiñones, a young man from the Mexican provinces who becomes disillusioned when he comes to recognize that Porfirian journalism is more committed to political opportunism than to ideological consistency or reasonable debate. Ángel de Campo also included critical reflections about journalism in his *La rumba* (1890), where a newspaper writer participates in a public spectacle that erupts out of the story of a domestic murder. The professional writer characters in these novels emerged from an anxiety about the effects of modernization that could alter familiar intellectual practices. This anxiety grew increasingly urgent as young men tried their hand at earning a living through journalism.

It is widely accepted that as *modernismo* formed and flourished in Mexico and the rest of Spanish America, the professionalization of writing offered a new class of educated men access to cultural and political power. When journalism became a professional calling, it formed a new intellectual space that could wrestle power away from the State and the Church. In his well-known analysis, Ángel Rama has shown that journalism became an attractive career for a growing group of educated men who aspired to access political and economic power at the end

of the nineteenth century (*Ciudad* 110). Noé Jitrik, supporting Rama's argument, goes on to claim that journalism was an appealing profession for Spanish American social climbers because the *modernista* generation helped create a professional environment for writing that was isolated from the government, even though most writers still depended on some kind of official appointment (99). Pablo Piccato has argued that the compromise between professional autonomy and official patronage was a defining characteristic of Mexico's journalism and literary activity after the French Intervention. According to Piccato, nineteenth-century Mexican journalists moved between multiple cultural fields in the pursuit of honor and fame (64). This honor, he claims, "brought journalists' names to the attention of the powerful and, with luck, paved the way to better-paid governmental jobs" (80). González Peña's memory of his first years in Mexico City reminds the reader that even after 1900, writers needed to earn money through a secondary professional occupation. He cites the words of his mentor, Justo Sierra, who said "'Si el escritor, en México, no vive de los empleos, ¿de qué ha de vivir?'" (*Gente* 17). Navigating the complex networks of power and influence were an inevitable part of the professional writer's life during the age of *modernismo*, even as late as 1908.

When Mauricio successfully ascends to the top of Mexico City's crowded journalism industry, he discovers that the leaders of the publishing industry are less professional than he had previously imagined. The contrasting imagery and characterizations between Mauricio's life in San Ángel and Mexico suggest that newspaper publishing in the capital is the inverse of the poet's bucolic romanticism. In the city, writing is a fiercely commercial business in which political and cultural capital smothers creativity and integrity. Following Mauricio to a meeting with his editor and future father-in-law, the narrator reveals that the newspaper has recently installed new equipment and that "ya funcionaba la nueva maquinaria, vomitandos tres ediciones

cotidianas del periódico” (131). Framed with this sickly connotation, it is no wonder that Mauricio’s entry into professional journalism produces within him a profound spiritual malaise.

For idealistic writers like Mauricio who worked in the Porfirian press, the compromises between Mexico City’s journalists and corrupt business practices produced intense feelings of disillusionment. Similar to the disgust that Rabasa’s writer-protagonist Juan Quiñones felt when he encountered the political opportunism of the press during the 1880s, Mauricio chokes down his contempt for his editor’s ineptitude. When Mauricio sits down in a meeting with the editor of *El Siglo*, Don Luis Zayas, the accomplished newspaperman speaks of his business accolades, citing famous encounters with Ignacio Altamirano and Vicente Riva Palacio, heroes of the French Intervention and popular journalists from the 1870s and 1880s. But when the narrator interjects with a long comment, the reader becomes aware of a profound hypocrisy in the newspaper industry: “[Don Luis] No alcanzaba a comprender que su encumbramiento debírase no a su valer propio, no a su cerebro, jamás estremecido por los grandes choques del pensar, sino a su criterio flexible y plegadizo, que sabía acomodarse a los sucesos” (175). In his service to Don Luis, Mauricio envisions improving his social standing, but the system of power and compromise at the newspaper threatens his personal and professional integrity.

Seeking a place among Mexico City’s intellectual elite, Mauricio encounters the complex and often contradictory codes of honor which dictated social and cultural practices among prominent journalists. Belief in the immutable value of truth, reason, independence, and creativity may have guided many writers’ self-perceptions during the Porfiriato, but when these same men encountered the Díaz regime’s powerful control of the press through large subsidies, they were often forced to find a compromised position between economic self-interest and aesthetic purity.<sup>2</sup> Mauricio arrives at a similar crossroads when Don Luis asks him to ghostwrite

a history of journalism. The poet thinks to himself that agreeing would mean “abdicating his personality; satisfying with his own talent the ambitions of a fool” (177). Yet he acquiesces to the editor’s request when he recognizes that the offer is an opportunity to improve his financial well-being and, as a result, earn the affection of María Luisa, the editor’s daughter. Mauricio’s dilemma reflects on the proposition that the moral integrity of Porfirian journalism had been abandoned for economic and social advantage. Mauricio’s compromise warns readers that professional journalism is unable to produce strong intellectuals due to the corrupting influence of ambition and commercial interest on the newspaper business. Yet despite his misgivings about his decision to help Don Luis, Mauricio achieves all of the success that he desired when he abandoned Nita in San Ángel. But in spite of all his influence, political power, and wealth, he realizes at the end of the novel that he cannot protect his son from a fatal case of pneumonia, nor endure tortuous memories and regrets about his lost aesthetic ideals.

The cronyism and spiritual vacuity that characterizes the representation of Mexico City’s cultural elite may be a somewhat realistic representation of late Porfirian Mexico, but more importantly it is the exact kind of corruption that European poets and artists anticipated when they began to explore romantic themes in the nineteenth century. If *modernismo* was “another romanticism” as Paz claims, it struck out against the development of these forces within societies transformed by the industrialization of printing processes and the dominant power of capital at the turn of the twentieth century. Mauricio’s story, then, is part of a tragic cycle in Mexican modernity in which the fear of corruption pushes the writer figure into detachment, confining his critique of wealth and power within the *torre de marfil*. The poet’s participation in modern life, on the other side of the paradox, shuts off his access to universal ideals.



In short, in *La musa bohemia* there is no escape from the social forces that extract wealth from artistic and intellectual work. The power of the aristocracy, the allure of metropolitan luxury, and the transformation of the natural environment determine the artist's trajectory, leaving him no opportunity to escape the social pressures that drove him to cultivate aesthetic idealism in the first place. By stereotyping Mauricio with these two characterizations of well-known writer figures, the novel makes a compelling case for the adjustment of expectations for modern Mexican intellectuals, encouraging them to maintain their aesthetic ideals as they simultaneously explore topics and themes drawn from lived experience and observations of the people and places that surround them.

But far from embracing the grittier realism of Ángel del Campo's urban novels or Federico Gamboa's pessimistic naturalism, González Peña inserts glimpses of Mexico's natural beauty, scenes of middle-class life, and a few panoramas of urban commerce to create a faithful portrait of the materially comfortable and spiritually confused intellectual class in Porfirian Mexico. The dialogues and sequence of events that narrate Mauricio's artistic corruption are logically organized, and the narrator's voice is often unobtrusive and subtle. Even when the novel touches on a politically-explosive issue, like the appropriateness of *pulque* consumption, the narrator calmly documents the characters' reactions without sermonizing: the decision to purchase *pulque* in the market on the way to Xochimilco occurred "a pesar de las protestas de las damas, que consideraban de mal gusto la hedionda bebida nacional" (116). Describing *pulque* as the "national drink," the narrator subtly shapes the scene and sets the stage for the conversation between Mauricio and Juan Eslava, but his intervention does not draw the reader's attention away from the narration of events. These stylistic features showcase the mimetic power of narrative that implicitly critiques both the bohemian and professional models of writing that

separate the author from his social environment. Along with the admonishment to incorporate more images and ideas from lived experience in Porfirian Mexico, the narration reinforces the role of the intellectual as a guide for the masses, a figure that, at least to some extent, is set apart from the social world of the majority of Mexican citizens. This disinterested observer was a traditional model of the intellectual figure in Porfirian Mexico, the man responsible for cultivating good taste and manners through education and the discerning consumption of cultural products. He shared his experiences with his reading public so that they could follow his example. In *La musa bohemia*, the voice of the narrator and the structure of the novel delicately balance realism and idealism to show how intellectuals can inspire their audiences with familiar images, synthesizing the traditional intellectual figure with the *modernista* writer.

As I discussed in Chapter 3, *realismo*, or realism, was a popular and powerful form for novels in the Porfiriato. Joaquina Navarro has shown that *realista* novelists like Rabasa, López Portillo, and Delgado, used their works to advance specific social agendas, promoting theses about the problems and solutions observed in Porfirian Mexico (26). In *La musa bohemia*, Mauricio's transformation from hopeful poet to melancholy professional follows a narrative thesis that rejects both bohemian detachment and the corruption of professional journalism. At the same time, the novel also maintains Manuel Gutiérrez Nájera's skeptical stance toward realism that appeared in his first call-to-arms for *modernista* writers. Beyond Mauricio and Juan Eslava's debate about inspiration, the tension between realism and a more imaginative or idealistic outlook is part of the structure of *La musa bohemia*. When the narrator uses free indirect discourse to summarize Mauricio's attraction to Nita at the beginning of the novel, he introduces a binary opposition between reality and imagination: "Los azares de la realidad, que según iba él convenciéndose no estaban siempre acordes con imaginaciones calenturientas,

diéronle en buena hora su princesa, pero sin todos los aditamentos y condiciones que exigía” (14). Reality breaks through Mauricio’s imagination, but he still feels unsatisfied with the results. And Mauricio’s thought process, retold directly by the narrator, flows naturally and includes a beautiful metaphor that cannot easily distinguish Mauricio’s thoughts from the narrator’s intervention.

Instead of the tortured feelings associated with Mauricio’s writing process, the narrator’s words flow fluidly and calmly. The contrast between Mauricio’s approach to writing and the narrator’s helps prove the novel’s thesis about writing practices in the late Porfiriato: a more mimetic approach to narration makes observation a resource for exploring abstract principles of beauty and morality. The point of view of the novel positions the reader in Mauricio’s world and on his shoulder when he sits in his study or looks out over the valley and into the city street. Free indirect discourse allows the narrator to unobtrusively communicate the emotional reactions and introspections of the characters.

As the reading public becomes aware of Mauricio’s aesthetic and moral shortcomings, they position themselves alongside the realist narrator and his moralizing thesis about the inadequacy of the bohemian and professional writer stereotypes. This alliance promotes a skeptical interpretation of Mauricio’s behavior and attitudes. The structure of the novel echoes Juan Eslava’s chastising comment to Mauricio in Xochimilco cited earlier: “Busca tu obra ahí, en la vida, en la vida vulgar, corriente, ordinaria, y estoy cierto de que la encontrarás” (114). The synthesis between realism and idealism, Eslava believes, is the way forward for Mexico’s fiction writers. The setting of the conversation, as the two men venture with their travelling companions to Xochimilco, imbues Eslava’s words with special significance, drawing attention to the ways in which Mexico’s natural beauty and its indigenous heritage play a role in the “ordinary life” of

the early twentieth century.<sup>3</sup> As the two men fall silent, their gazes, and the narrator's, begin to identify the splendid natural and architectural details of their ride and as they move forward the narrator's voice captures the character's astonishment: "Embebidos en el divino paisaje, juraban y perjuraban todos que en su vida habían visto nada mejor, asombrándose de que a sus años, y estando tan cerca de aquellas pintorescas regiones, no las hubiesen conocidos y admirado algunos lustros antes" (116). In this moment, the narrator's description could easily be interpreted as a prescription for Mexico's writers, a call to exploit the natural beauty of Mexico's environment for cultural production.<sup>4</sup> The novel suggests in this pivotal scene in Mauricio's development that his art can only flourish if he pays more attention to Mexico's uniqueness, both in nature and in society. Eslava's advice reinforces the realist style of the novel itself, a keen demonstration of the critical and inspirational capacity of a work of art that bridges the discursive and ideological gaps that formed between the *modernistas'* cosmopolitanism and a more traditional representation of national customs and habits.

Positivism continued to shape Mexico's political and economic policies in the waning years of the Díaz dictatorship despite resistance from the *modernistas* and Mexico's most conservative Catholic groups.<sup>5</sup> One of the premises of Mexican intellectual and political life in the nineteenth century was that social development was a progressive process and that nations needed to pass through stages of development to reach the highest level of civilization. This desire for modernization joined with positivism in Porfirian culture as scientists, politicians, businessmen, and writers pursued projects that, in their view, would improve Mexico's development relative to Europe and North America.<sup>6</sup> An influential positivist essay published in 1909, one year after the publication of *La musa bohemia*, expressed this modernizing ambition: Andrés Molina Enríquez's *Los grandes problemas nacionales*. In that canonical essay, Molina

Enríquez lobbied for political and juridical reforms that would improve Mexico's agricultural production. He documented the variety of Mexico's agricultural practices and plotted them against the "desarrollo evolutivo de todas las sociedades." With this belief in a consistent and universal social pattern, he defended the centralization of power within the Díaz regime, condemned the hacienda system inherited from the colonial era, and proposed racial miscegenation as a mechanism for improving the living conditions of indigenous peoples.

Read against Molina Enríquez's essay, *La musa bohemia* rejects the positivist belief that economic success can guarantee happiness. Mauricio's experience in Mexico City clearly reveals that modernization through financial development reifies existing social arrangements and maintains the dominant position of wealthy families. The novel also points out the limitations of determinist characterizations that overemphasize progressive development without considering the redemptive—or condemnatory—role of individual choice. Carrying forward the skeptical stance taken by Gutiérrez Nájera and other *modernistas*, González Peña demonstrates through irony and parody that material determinism cannot adequately represent the actions of an individual in late Porfirian society.

The use of a determinist paradigm in Mauricio's characterization lays bare the irony of holding concurrent beliefs in social determinism and social mobility. Both ideas were part of positivist paradigms for development during the Porfiriato, including Molina Enríquez's. Mauricio cannot improve himself and his social condition if his background determines the course of his future, particularly since the novel repeatedly associates the corruption of Mauricio's aesthetic ideals with his social ambition, which itself appears to be a consequence of his upbringing. Mauricio's desire for a comfortable future continues to dictate his actions in the present. Nita recognizes her lover's impatience after the publication of *Dos almas*, and she

laments the subtle changes in Mauricio's physical and emotional state of being: "Por el semblante del poeta, nacido en la burguesía rica, con alma bohemia, esparcíase indefinido aire de importancia, que más le identificaba con la clase social en que se meció su cuna que con la otra jocunda y bullanguera" (132). Nita's observation draws the reader's attention to the precipitous transformation of Mauricio's character as he pursues fame and fortune. From the narrator's perspective, Mauricio's ambition is a natural and inevitable consequence of his nature and development. The decision to abandon Nita and marry María Luisa is unavoidable, he suggests, because Mauricio had always pursued other loves. The narrator summarizes Mauricio's internal monologue:

La hora había llegado. Era menester dejar a la musa para seguir a la otra. Hacia tal fin hubo de encaminarse toda su vida pasada, y en el instante mismo de realizarle, retrocedía, espantado, acobardado, pretendiendo en vano acallar sus escrúpulos. Raudo voló el tiempo. Al cabo, la certeza de que no amaba a Nita, de que su pasión y su porvenir empujábanle hacia la otra, le tranquilizó. Por lo demás, imposible ser clemente: o querida o esposa. ¿Y por qué había de sacrificarse, vamos a ver, al amor de una muchacha que era tan buena como cualquiera otra, pero que constituía un serio obstáculo para su triunfo definitivo en la vida? (232)

The narrator's diction hammers a determinist interpretation into Mauricio's actions, directing readers to consider how and why he arrived at his decision. The circularity of time in this characterization further diminishes the role of any single moral action and places Mauricio's story in a broad social framework.

In order to communicate messages to readers, realist narratives depend on a belief that the outcomes of certain events are determined by the arrangement of physical or social

phenomena. But in *La musa bohemia* the *modernista* skepticism of materialist positivism endures, and an ironic use of deterministic narrative techniques criticizes the capacity of narrative realism to capture the breadth of human experience. Similar to Comte's positivist belief that truths about human behavior could be derived from observation of the natural world, the realist novel relies on cause-effect relationships to develop stories about the characters and their social worlds. This kind of determinism, however, was attacked by *modernistas* who believed that it corrupted, or at least ignored, literature's access to aesthetic and moral ideals. El Duque Job likely would have agreed with Juan Eslava when Eslava entreats Mauricio to look for inspiration in his surroundings. After Gutiérrez Nájera, other Mexican *modernistas* explored the impurities of the real world around them in poetry and narrative, but always with an eye toward the redemptive role of literature. The idea that all moral and aesthetic truth was bound to deterministic laws threatened the innovative impulse of Mexican *modernismo* as well as the creation of vibrant cultural institutions that could inspire readers to take an active interest in the formation of their personal aesthetic beliefs and practices.

Even though *La musa bohemia* employs naturalist techniques to place Mauricio's story within a broad social context, the novel also treats the positivist paradigm parodically. Prendes sagely points out that many Porfirian authors, even many naturalists, were skeptical of positivism's ability to judge moral truth based on material observation (173). In this novel the corruption of Mauricio's aesthetic ideals emerges from a positivist obsession with progress. Mauricio believes that he can avoid the determination of his class position and rise to a higher social standing. In a scene at the home of his boss and future father-in-law, Mauricio reflects on his life and how he has arrived at the threshold of his ambition. "Las diversas etapas de su vida

podía sintetizarse en pasiones” the narrator begins, setting up a positivist framework in which stages of progress can be measured against observable phenomena. The narrator then continues:

Fue la primera el grande, el desesperado anhelo de libertado que estalló en su alma de adolescente, en represalias de su infancia casi monástica, de su niñez sacrificada a la monomanía devota de su parienta y a la indiferencia mundana de su padre. Había constituido la segunda aquel idilio, en que el amor fervoroso por la muchacha que encontrara al acaso, y adorase en el instante de emoción de la primera caricias, enlazábase con una sincera aspiración de arte; como si el amor juvenil, sano, fresco, de la musa, hubiera fermentado su cerebro, que siempre se inclinó a la pereza, pero que no era insensible al germinal cuando una mano amorosa y blanca dejaba caer la simiente. Y era la última esta nueva pasión, mezcla de amor más artificial que sincero, despertado merced a prestigios femeninos por él hasta entonces no vistos en su existencia bohemia, de apetitos mundanos que en su ánimo infundía el éxito, y de una ambición terrible de subir, de subir muy alto, de tomar revancha de la bancarrota social de su familia, de ser lo que debía ser por su abolengo y su talento. (184-85)

The three stages described by the narrator mimic the three stages of development at the heart of Comte’s positivism, the “progressive course of the human mind” in which the mind moves from explaining phenomena in terms of supernatural beings (the theological stage) to abstract forces (the metaphysical stage) to general facts (the positive stage) (Lenzer 72).<sup>7</sup> For Mauricio, the three stages are associated with an isolated and monastic adolescence, his bohemian life with Nita, and his traitorous ambition to climb the social ladder through marriage. In the narrator’s description of Mauricio’s thoughts, the second stage is the most beautiful and enjoyable, filled with the transformative power of art and love. Establishing the homological links between Comte’s



system and Mauricio's development, the narrator's description implicitly condemns positivist beliefs for grotesquely manipulating metaphysical beliefs with economic motivations.

Realism and naturalism may have helped open the insular and esoteric elements of Porfirian literary culture, but they were also the products of a materialist paradigm that González Peña and the other members of the *Ateneo* wanted to keep in check. Without conceding the point entirely to the realist tradition that had maintained an interest in Mexico's unique landscape and customs, *La musa bohemia* challenged the next generation of Porfirian novel writers to find a third way between the cult of classical beauty and a disinterested documentation of human suffering in the face of modernization.

González Peña was a writer of the times, a man who did not look too far into the future nor dwell in the past.<sup>8</sup> He did not dream about drastically different social arrangements than those that he encountered in his middle-class upbringing in Jalisco and Mexico City. David Travis, in his unpublished dissertation on González Peña, reports that, based on conversations with the writer's children, as the Mexican Revolution mobilized the entire country after 1911 the author stayed in Mexico where he quietly supported the revolutionary cause, though he did not support "the manner in which the end result was achieved" (17). Criticism of González Peña's novels frequently characterize him as a "Porfirian" writer, a man whose attitudes and taste more closely aligned with the novelistic practices and concerns of the nineteenth century than with the intellectual reboot proposed by the *Ateneo de la juventud*.<sup>9</sup> This assessment makes sense given that all but one of González Peña's novels was written before Díaz's exile, and the last was written in 1915 (published in 1919), before the end of the violent period of the Revolution.<sup>10</sup> Similarities in style and content abound between González Peña's novels and those of his predecessors, yet *La musa bohemia* challenges Mexico's intellectual establishment to recognize

that cultural practices inherited from the past are preventing a broad discussion and appreciation of truth, beauty, and virtue in Mexican society.

Even so, *La musa bohemia* is not an expansive social document. This is hardly surprising given González Peña's comfortable social position in Mexico's intellectual middle class before—and after—the Mexican Revolution. The characters and landscapes that appear in the novel represent the small middle of class of Mexican society, a group of professionals who earned a living but were neither members of the landholding elite nor of the vast population of poor laborers. Although Mauricio, his neighbors, and his peers appear to be content in their professional occupations, the economic disparity between the haves and have-nots dominates their view of Mexican society. Standing at his son's bedside in Mexico City, Mauricio thinks about the publication of his first novel and the vision he had of his social transformation: "Allá atrás quedaba el ejército de los míseros que van a la conquista del pan, que luchan, que sufren; delante, los ricos, los felices, marchaban tranquilos, ahítos de satisfacciones y de amor, del amor sin sacrificio, sin miseria, sin el eterno problema del mañana" (243). The *miseros* and the *ricos* were the two recognizable strata of Porfirian society with which Mauricio could identify. And though Mauricio's life as a working journalist was hardly equivalent to the lives of the majority of Mexicans who labored in fields and mines for very meager wages, his frustration with the dominance of the Porfirian elite echoes popular discontent with the distribution of wealth and labor among the Mexican citizenry. Several barbs are launched against the aristocracy in the novel, including the narrator's description of María Luisa's prominent family: "Y aunque nunca su familia hubiese logrado penetrar en la aristocracia—conjunto de personas que no pos los títulos, aunque sí por la vetustez del apellido y el oro por tal se tenía—, considerábase dentro de ella, alimentando, sin embargo, un profundo rencor hacía los aristócratas." (180). From the

narrator's perspective, the aristocracy's hold on power is almost absolute, a state of affairs which produces feelings of jealousy and anger among those, like Mauricio, wish to improve their social position. Even María Luisa's father, a powerful newspaper editor, cannot overcome the barriers to power formed by familial connections and large inequalities in wealth.

Although the novel does not extensively address the hegemony of the Porfirian aristocracy, observations voiced by both Mauricio and the narrator challenge the proliferation of bourgeois tastes that circulated among those who aspired to join the wealthy elite of Mexican society. By questioning how money and stature could be more important than connections with people or the pursuit of beauty and truth, the novel carries forward the *modernista* opposition to materialism and skepticism about the effects of economic and technological modernization. Though González Peña and the other *Ateneistas* recognized that modern technology was not necessarily antagonistic to their pedagogical and cultural goals, they hesitated to accept economic modernization as the foundation for cultural modernization, even after several decades of development and investment under the Díaz regime. Unlike previous *modernista* novels that were more sympathetic to the regime's "order and progress" program, in *La musa bohemia* the preoccupations with corrupt social formations are more openly oppositional.

Natural beauty and urban technology form a binary opposition in Mauricio's bohemian mind; but in the narrator's descriptions of the rural and urban landscapes they are inextricably linked. When Mauricio settles with Nita in San Ángel, he enjoys spending time in nature and avoiding "manifestaciones de la existencia ciudadana" (8) But, from the suburb he can easily reach the newspaper offices, the theaters, and Chapultepec Park via train and streetcar. Even though Mauricio wants to avoid symbols of modernization and urbanization, the narrator, looking through Mauricio's eyes at the landscape outside the window of his study, notes that on

the pristine, natural landscape also appear the “hilos del telégrafo, tendidos a lo largo de la vía del ferrocarril del Valle, [en los que] bandadas de pájaros se detenían, lanzando al aire su parloteo ebrio de sol” (8). The telegraph and the locomotive, two of the most important technological innovations that facilitated modernization during the Porfiriato, appear in superposition on the natural landscape. And, the narrator ironically jabs at Mauricio’s hesitance to engage with modernization when he points out that even the birds have incorporated the telegraph lines into their musical performances.

Technology transformed the ways in which Mexicans communicated with each other during the Porfiriato, and, as the narration makes clear, trains and streetcars replaced carriages in Mexico City’s more economically prosperous neighborhoods. The locomotive—just like the telegraph—altered relationships between Mexican citizens by accelerating communications and bringing people into closer contact with each other. In a way the locomotive shattered the foundation of the *torre de marfil* that the *Ateneístas* reviled and required intellectuals to confront the reality of a modernized Mexico. Nita recognizes that the locomotive, symbol of Porfirian progress and modernity, destroys the isolation that protects the bohemian peace that she enjoys with Mauricio. As she focalizes the narrative description, she associates the steel behemoth with the contamination of the natural and romantic environment: “El silbato de la locomotora que pasaba ante su ventana, manchando con gris espiral de humo la diafanidad azul, la hizo arrancarse de su yo interno y volver a la realidad de las cosas. Su carita mustia expresó un mohín de hastío. Había buscado la augusta serenidad de los campos para pensar, y la aparición del monstruo que la turbara desagradóla” (134). The imagery brusquely associates the train with the corruption of natural aesthetic beauty, particularly the serene *modernista* blue projected from the

heavens. While the locomotive disrupts Nita's internal monologue, it makes Mauricio even more self-absorbed. As he boards the train bound the capital, he loses sight of his surroundings:

En aquel propio instante, Mauricio Villaescusa, en un rincón del tren, se entregaba a una visión del futuro, mirando con indiferencia los paisajes que a modo de cinta cinematográfica se ofrecían al paso. Por un fenómeno que él explicábase de modo incierto, había perdido casi su antiguo amor por la Naturaleza. Al medio ambiente, entonces de singular hermosura, con el misterio de sus quintas adormidas bajo la luminosa caricia del otoño, prefería la contemplación de su vida interior. (135)

Mauricio finds that his "internal life" is accessed more easily when he withdraws into the shadowy comfort of the train carriage, creating a parallel characterization between Mauricio and Nita that yields a paradoxical understanding of the role that the locomotive plays in Porfirian life. The contradiction between the lovers' experiences is not easily resolved, but readers are presented with an implicit affirmation of literature's ability to shape strategies for adapting to modern life, including the quicker communications, the greater ease of movement, and the expansion of metropolitan power, tastes, and practices into the suburbs and countryside. Unlike Mauricio's ostrich-like resistance to technological modernization, the narrator's willingness to explore the impact that the locomotive has on Mauricio's and Nita's sensibilities lends him credibility as an observer of Mexican reality and participant in social transformation.

Technological innovation not only brought more people like Mauricio into the city, it also allowed the values and practices of the urban center to expand. Like most *modernista* works before it, *La musa bohemia* warns that the growing influence of bourgeois tastes and values threatens to perpetuate economic inequality and frustrate intellectual achievement. Romance and talk of love may fill the intimate spaces of *La musa bohemia*, but marriage is a heartbreaking

experience for almost all of the characters due to its association with the bourgeoisie. On this point the novel's cynical representation of marriage evokes similar *modernista* portrayals of bourgeois life, particularly the "Paréntesis" in Manuel Gutiérrez Nájera's novel *Por donde se sube al cielo*, discussed in Chapter 1. In both stories, the results of bourgeois marriage torture a male artist protagonist; his tastes and ideals are corrupted by the accumulation of wealth and the paranoid occupation of keeping up appearances. Mauricio experiences marriage as a contract associated with preserving financial interests across generations, not the passionate expression of romantic desire that creates productive citizens, like in López Portillo's *La parcela*. Mauricio's unhappiness in his utterly shallow marriage to María Luisa suggests to readers that bourgeois tastes and values, protected by the *pax porfiriana*, continue to hinder the development of Mexican culture. Mauricio realizes his mistake after he assumes the directorship of *El Siglo*; once he achieves professional success he begins to loath his responsibilities, his wife, and his urban lifestyle. The maintenance costs for his house and service staff, the unending social engagements, and his in-laws' lack of aesthetic taste drive Mauricio into a deep depression. Reflecting on his unhappiness with bourgeois life, Mauricio frustratingly realizes that he lost something when he left Nita and that his "youth disappeared with the formal bourgeois practices of married life" (255).

What could be so threatening about bourgeois family life? For Mauricio, it recalls memories of his chaste and restricted childhood that he spent with his aunt, as well as the lack of freedom that he felt when he regularly attended church services. Mauricio feels threatened by institutions that curtail his artistic freedom; he feels threatened by marriage because it would insert him in moral and financial institutions of control. When Mauricio persuades Nita to come

and live with him, he provocatively skirts a marriage proposal and denounces the practice, stating:

El matrimonio es una fórmula: ¿qué significa un artículo del código o un fragmento de los evangelios, ante el amor libre, soberano, de dos muchachos que se encuentran en su camino y se dan el uno al otro sin reticencias, sin tiquis-miquis sociales, impulsados solamente por sus instintos, obedientes a la ley de la Naturaleza, que les manda amar, amar mucho, para que el mundo perdure y sea grande y domine a la muerte y a los siglos? (68-69).

In his condemnation of bourgeois marriage, Mauricio indicates that the hegemonic power of the Church and State are obstacles to the expression of love, which, in his bohemian stage of life, represents a pure state of freedom. His words reduce the marriage vows to their textual foundations in Christian scripture and liberal philosophy. By drawing attention to the metonymies that prescribe the boundaries and objectives of monogamous, heterosexual coupling, the poet reveals their artifice and their unnatural intervention into a supposed natural order that, in the mind of the naïve poet, brings men and women together in a simple and pure ritual of commitment. Even if Mauricio's reluctance to marry Nita arises from a youthful desire for freedom, in his marriage with María Luisa he experiences the distorting social and moral effects of bourgeois marriage on his intellectual sensibilities.

While traditional marriage can resiliently perpetuate values in a society from one generation to the next, in *La musa bohemia* the narrator and Mauricio both lament that in Porfirian Mexico these values have been corrupted, leaving Mauricio's bourgeois family neither content, nor productive. One night when he is keeping vigil over his son's sickness, Mauricio reacts in disbelief when he hears his wife and mother-in-law pleasantly chatting with a neighbor

about her recent marriage and a new collection of hats that have attracted their attention. The scene develops with undifferentiated comments before the narrator snaps the reader's attention back to Mauricio and his stunned reaction:

--¿Has visto los nuevos modelos?

--En *El Puerto de Veracruz*, ayer...

--Son preciosos, ¿verdad?

--Y esa forma de campana, tan elegante, tan bonita... Te digo que son unos sombreros que...

Villaescusa huyó, helado. (270-71)

María Luisa's indifference to her son's sickness in this scene reinforces Mauricio's solitude, and betrays the elite class's destructive obsession with commercial consumption. The reading public may recognize the irony of Mauricio's reaction to his wife's conversation about hats, given that many *modernistas* cultivated an elegant style of dress. But when Mauricio hears his wife chattering about fashion while her son lies sick in the next room, readers shares his disturbed reaction, particularly since Mauricio's position focalizes the scene and provides access to the women's conversation. María Luisa may sit at her son's bedside during his last breaths, but the allure of luxury and fashion at times distract her from her motherly obligations during his illness. The permeation of bourgeois tastes throughout Mexico City's elite distresses Mauricio, and also signals to readers that Mexico City's cultural practices are incapable of surviving the modernization process. The death of Mauricio's son reveals that obsessions with consumption keep the bourgeoisie from producing Mexican citizens.

Even though Mauricio initially wants to reject the panoptical world of gossip and social one-upmanship that he observes in Mexico City's cultural elite, the urban competition for fame,



wealth, and honor overcomes his bohemian aloofness. Mauricio's actions express the *modernista* critique of bourgeois values in Porfirian society, challenging the insular power of Mexico City's elite families and neighborhoods. Though the novel comes far short of denouncing the most wealthy and powerful Mexican families, it does suggest that their preoccupations with consumption and good manners cannot produce joyful or meaningful human experience. When Mauricio flees his house after Luisín's death, he wants to put distance between himself and the bourgeois tastes that have corrupted his life: "Salió del barrio elegante, cruzó la línea de los ferrocarriles eléctricos; internóse luego en un laberinto de anchas calles a medio urbanizar" (274). The "barrio elegante" is the mausoleum of Mauricio's aesthetic ideals and the end of his hope for the future. Mauricio's story, and the narrator's attention to the spaces of the influential elite in Mexico City that he inhabits, connects bourgeois marriage with the destruction of the poet's reproductive abilities.

*La musa bohemia* provocatively exposes several problems and contradictions in late Porfirian society, but aside from Juan Eslava's encouragement to engage with reality more directly, the novel does not offer many solutions. To overcome a completely pessimistic reading of Mexican cultural life in *La musa bohemia*, a close reading of Nita's intellectual development may signal a path forward. She embodies traditional liberal beliefs in freedom and hard work that challenge Mauricio's decadentism. Even as a woman in a male-dominated society, she receives an education and takes advantage of opportunities to participate in intellectual activity. And when she decides to reject Mauricio and separate herself from his nostalgic vision of the past at the end of the novel, she asserts her agency as an independent intellectual subject. Nita's refusal to return to Mauricio promotes the novel's argument that intellectual practices in Mexican culture must submit to an uneasy alliance between *modernismo* and nationalism in order to adjust

to changing social circumstances and cultural priorities. It also positions a woman as an active and discerning figure in the Mexican cultural landscape in the late Porfiriato. Nita may appear to be a typical *modernista* woman, but she is not a mute muse. In many ways she embodies traditional feminine qualities typical observed in nineteenth-century romantic heroines, but her decision to refuse Mauricio is clearly an act of free will and good judgment, not a divinely or naturally fated event.

As the narrator recounts Nita's family history in the first part of the novel, he ascribes her exceptional inspirational abilities to her supportive upbringing and her access to education. The narrator notes that Nita became entranced by books when she was four years old. Her father, a musician, taught her how to read and enrolled her in a primary school where she was awarded several prizes. Her interest in reading grew as she entered adult life, motivating her to spend hours reading books from Mauricio's library. The narrator draws the reader's attention to this aspect of Nita's past with an explicit reference to cultural debates in Mexico, highlighting the important role that education played in the formation of productive female citizens:

El señor Iris pensaba a la moderna en lo tocante a educación femenina, por más que sus arrestos pedagógicos no fueran tan lejos como los de las *feministas* al uso. No pasó por su magín el que la chica abrazara la abogacía ni la medicina; que estas ciencias más propias eran en ánimos varoniles. Mas tampoco soñó con que Nita estuviera en el futuro sometida a los sinsabores de la aguja, o sufriera las impertinencias de las señoritas aristócratas que buscan damas para entretener sus ocios. (30)

Nita's father hoped that she would avoid becoming a poor seamstress or a rich dilettante, and decided that her best chance for social success and personal fulfillment would be the acquisition of practical and artistic knowledge. Drawing attention to the father's "modern thinking" in this

matter, the narrator draws on ideas from several Porfirian conversations about the changing practices and functions of education in Mexican society. Nita's familiarity with intellectual activity and her ability to read improved her standing among middle-class men like Mauricio, but, more importantly, they also gave her a sense of identity and more personal freedom than her non-educated female peers. This explains why when her poet rejects her, she is not victimized by his neglect. In fact, she survives with enough strength to reject *him* at the novel's conclusion.

The processes of modernization that transformed Mexico during the Porfiriato shifted popular expectations about the role of women in society. In many literary and philosophic texts published in Mexico in the nineteenth century, female characters were associated with moral and spiritual well-being, as opposed to the professional, technical, and material knowledge and experience of men. Most Porfirian elites likely would have agreed with a statement made by Gutiérrez Nájera in 1882 regarding gender roles: "La educación es el resultado de dos fuerzas unidas: la fuerza intelectual que debe derivarse del padre, y la fuerza del amor que nace de la mujer" (*Obras* 14, 114). But some women Porfirian women began to push against this simplified gender schema with appeals for improved access to public education. Laureana Wright de Kleinhans, a Mexican-born daughter of an American father and Mexican mother, challenged the lack of education and cultural activity among upper-class women in several literary magazines during the 1880s, including *Las Hijas del Anáhuac*, which she founded in 1887. In the "Prospecto" that outlined the editorial goals of the monthly periodical, she wrote:

La mujer mexicana, adicta por naturaleza a todo lo bello y a todo lo grande, ha llegado en su mayor parte a un grado bastante elevado de ilustración, y necesita por lo mismo un campo donde pueda ensanchar sus conocimientos y darlos a luz, haciéndolos extensivos a

su sex en general, a fin de que se levante a la altura de la sociedad en que vive y de la época que representa. (2)

Kleinhans boldly asserted that women had inherent intellectual abilities and that Mexico's national interest would be served if those abilities were given an outlet. Gabriela Cano has observed that in her public statements defending women's education, patriotic tones evoking Mexico's liberal tradition adeptly countered allegations that protestant values threatened the domesticity, modesty, sentimentalism, and submissiveness that characterized Mexico's traditional female figures (112). Kleinhans' arguments did not wholly reject this traditional view; she accepted that motherhood was an important responsibility, but she encouraged society to see that it was not a woman's only responsibility.

In *La musa bohemia*, even when women represent moral virtue, their participation in public life does not exclude intellectual activity. Although almost all of the women in the novel are relatively flat stereotypes, the diversity between their public and private actions fills the social landscape of the novel with detail and nuance. Female characters are saddled with the enormous responsibility of guiding Mauricio's ambitions. In the extended quotation regarding Mauricio's progressive development cited earlier in this chapter, each stage of the poet's life is associated with a specific female character. Tía Victoria, Nita, and María Luisa represent distinct feminine stereotypes that coexisted in Mexico at the turn of the century. During his adolescence Mauricio spent most of his time with his aunt Victoria, a devout Catholic who raised her nephew with strict moral expectations. The "desperate wish for freedom" that propelled Mauricio from her control pushed him out of his home and into his bohemian life with Nita. When he settles down with Nita, her love and beauty figuratively plant the seeds of literary insight, and yet his insatiable desire to climb into the highest spheres of Mexican society lead him to pursue María

Luisa and the “mundane appetites” of her world. None of the women can fill the void in Mauricio’s life that leaves him restless and unhappy, but for the readers of *La musa bohemia* they represent three different forms of moral and artistic inspiration.

Sacrifice and faithfulness are the two virtues that carry Nita through her separation from Mauricio, and protect her from his desperate invitation to return to the nostalgia-tinted bohemian sentimentality of their past. Far from challenging stereotypes about women, *La musa bohemia* channels the popular belief in the moral instincts of educated women in order to criticize Mauricio’s desires for bohemian idealism and professional ambition. Jean Franco has outlined the ways in which women became responsible for the purity of the Mexican family during the nineteenth century, particularly highlighting how literature often reduced women to symbolic stand-ins for purity and corruption in men (101). This was true not only in literature, but also for many middle- and upper-class women who were interpellated by institutions of the Díaz regime in their role as custodians of the moral development of the nation. Poor women in the Porfiriato were often the objects of State interventions that sought to control behavior that did not align with this vision of feminine purity.<sup>11</sup> Aside from Moni, Mauricio’s housekeeper, lower-class women are entirely absent from the novel. Notwithstanding this traditional association between Nita’s femininity and her moral virtue, the novel explicitly argues that women should become educated, even in commercial matters. Nita’s education serves a dual purpose: it helps her maintain her family’s honor and purity, but it also gives her independence. The purity/corruption binary opposition may persistently define women as literary characters, as Franco laments, but Nita also explicitly challenges her male partner and asserts her independent agency as a “modern” woman.

Despite the relative lack of character development and her close resemblance to a stereotypical figure that supports the needs of the nation through humble self-sacrifice, Nita embodies many of the characteristics associated with the liberal values that emerged as the consensus base of Mexico's national identity after the French Intervention: education, hard work, and honesty. This identity allows Nita to subvert the control that many nineteenth-century literary and political texts asserted over women's public activities, including *modernista* prose and poetry. Gwen Kirkpatrick has observed that *modernista* poetry is often difficult for twentieth-century readers due to the vast accumulation of poetic objects and symbols. "We find it hard to move around these ornately furnished rooms and especially amidst the heavy-lidded goddesses who inhabit them" she writes, signaling the disturbing representations of women whose inspirational qualities are more passive than active (6-7). Female figures in *modernismo* often fall into two categories: either the *femme fatale* who threatens the poet's masculinity, or the princess whose other-worldly purity and beauty inspire him. This second figure is the form with which Nita can most closely be associated, though she is far from being the "heavy-lidded goddess" that Kirkpatrick describes. Nita more closely resembles Gutiérrez Nájera's Duquesa Job, a source of beautiful images and romantic feelings that the poet exploits through his mastery of language. Reading Rubén Darío's poetry, Cathy Jrade has observed that the female figure in his "Sonatina" is a merely passive participant in literary production. "Her spiritual longing is noble and praiseworthy" Jrade writes, "yet, without the aggressive male, she is doomed to languish with unfulfilled desires" (*Delmira Agustini* 24). Unlike the Duquesa Job, or Darío's submissive princess, Nita is given the opportunity to talk back to her poet, to question his motives, and to assert her own agency, at least to the degree afforded her by a discourse grounded in Mexico's liberal tradition.

When readers first meet Nita she appears to easily fit into the *modernista* stereotype of femininity, but events of the plot expel her from the *modernista*'s parlor and push her out into the world. In this way Nita combines characteristics that I have noted in female characters in other chapters: like Magda in Gutiérrez Nájera's *Por donde se sube al cielo*, Nita is confronted with the need to reorganize her priorities and free herself from a suffocating attachment, and like Ramona in López Portillo's *La parcela*, Nita is the embodiment of purity and grace. Because Nita closely follows traditional representations of femininity, she reminds readers that modernization has had negative effects on society, especially the corrupting ambition that produces Mauricio's solipsism. But the discourse of *modernismo* distorts her traditional representation slightly by emphasizing her education and her role in the production of new ideas. In their home in San Ángel, the union between male poet and female muse is part of Mauricio's vision of a fulfilled future and the narrator's expectations for a joyful life: "Juntos podrían hacer la obra humana y la obra artística: crear hijos y crear libros" (19). The romantic dyad is physically and aesthetically productive: the woman is not a passive subject in the development of art or of the artist's career. The title of Mauricio's successful novel, *Dos almas*, points to the inspiration that he draws from their romantic coupling. This representation of the bohemian couple is typical of *modernista* representations of women, Jade would claim, because the *modernista* woman "is the other that complements and completes, the one with whom the poet attains a vision of beauty, harmony, and artistic perfection that is simultaneously in tune with and supported by nature" (Modernismo 69). And even though Mauricio and the narrator sometimes mention that Nita is a passive recipient of her lover's literary taste, she is essential to the realization of Mauricio's intellectual potential.<sup>12</sup>

By the end of the novel Nita is not so passive; she is a thoughtful and mostly independent agent of her own desires and moral judgments. She enjoys fulfilling her responsibilities as a caregiver and nurturer for her neighbor's blind daughter, Nela, and the work builds her self-confidence after Mauricio leaves her for María Luisa. When Mauricio returns to San Ángel to beg for Nita's forgiveness, his pleas cannot convince his lover to return to him. Although both characters experience feelings of loneliness after his departure for Mexico City, Nita fills her life with thoughtful dedication to Nela, while Mauricio cannot find anything to believe in, especially after the tragic death of his son. Mauricio is horrified when he realizes that Nita is no longer the *musa bohemia* who lives in a world of artistic ideals, detached from social reality; he recognizes that in her post-Mauricio life she has become a "methodical woman, respectful of the environment which surrounds her" (284). This respect for her situation gives Nita the strength to resist Mauricio and his romantic entreaties, grounding her in the real social world instead of in an imaginative *torre de marfil*. The narrator focalizes the scene briefly through her perspective to reveal her inner dilemma: "Sentía deseos de huir y de quedarse; atraía la tentación del pasado, y por otra parte, su buen sentido de mujer víctima decía que debería arrancarse de aquellos brazos que la enlazaban con la energía de los del naufrago al cogerse a los despojos de la embarcación perdida" (282). This brief glimpse into Nita's reaction situates a reading public sympathetic to liberal ideals on Nita's side of the conflict and reject Mauricio and the past as a "temptation." Characterizing her former lover as a "shipwrecked man," Nita separates herself from his struggles and embraces a strong subjective position that prevents her from becoming his last piece of driftwood on the open sea of his artistic disillusionment. When Mauricio leaves, Nita finds herself again torn between following him, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, returning to Don Alejo's home. When she chokes down a pitiful sob, resisting the temptation to



run after her poet, she turns toward the house and the last line of novel summarizes her decision: “Era su último sacrificio” (286). This ambiguously voiced conclusion could be interpreted as a message from either Nita or the narrator, but regardless of the source, it affirms Nita’s independence from Mauricio and her capacity to make choices on her own terms.

When Mauricio returns to San Ángel, he tries to reenact a narrative solution to disenchantment with modernity that Mexican readers had seen before. Juan Quiñones, hero of Emilio Rabasa’s *Novelas mexicanas*, made a similar move after becoming disillusioned with the politics and corruption of Mexico City in the early 1890s. As Yliana Rodríguez González has observed, the movement between the country and city is quite common in Mexican realist fiction. Rodríguez González interprets Quiñones’ story as an allegory in which an ambitious youth loses his innocence by venturing to the city, but regains his virtue by returning home. She also paraphrases an argument made by José Luis Martínez that reads the movement between the country and the city as a demonstration of the validity of geographic determinism: “los personajes son y deben ser del lugar al que pertenecen, a pesar suyo” (78). By this logic, Quiñones must return to the country because he is ill-suited to metropolitan life. So when Mauricio is drawn back to San Ángel after losing his son, readers could expect him to find solace, but Nita refuses to submit to Mauricio’s nostalgic supplication. He is not suited to the tranquility of suburban life, the new site of domestic peace in Mexico where Nita and her adopted family live peacefully. Nita’s eagerness to learn, and her ability to recognize the pitfalls of economic ambition and corrupt ideals make her a surprisingly traditional agent for proposing adjustments to the intellectual practices of the Porfiriato.

Critical interventions of *modernista* authors in Mexican culture may not have threatened the dominant political order of the Díaz regime, but in *La musa bohemia* the critiques of

materialism and bourgeois taste threaten that order more directly. The *Revista Azul* and the *Revista Moderna* preserved the hegemonic power structure of the Porfiriato and circulated a representation of national identity that supported the regime's values, namely the importance of progress measured by participation in and with an international community.<sup>13</sup> But in the *modernista* rejection of positivism lays the foundation for a critique of the scientific politics that, as Hale has shown, guided public policy in the last decade of the Porfiriato. The *Ateneo de la Juventud* affirmed individual freedoms and liberties in the face of the positivists' deterministic worldview, challenging the centralization of power and the homogenization of cultural practice that appear in the novel's representation of Mexico City's elite neighborhoods.

Why does *La musa bohemia* represent the uneasy alliances of cultural life in the late Porfiriato? In short, to propose changes to intellectual practices in the face of shifting social conditions. The novel implies that intellectuals risk becoming irrelevant either due to their self-imposed isolation from society or as a result of the commercialization of their talents. Mauricio's despair at the end of the novel is a caution to readers and warning that expectations for cultural production would need to change to avoid creating a generation of writers who would suffer his fate.

The use of paradox and contradiction as a rhetorical strategy in *La musa bohemia* complements the *Ateneo de la Juventud*'s many contradictions in the Porfirian cultural field. They were *modernistas* who rejected the resuscitation of the *Revista Azul*, and anti-positivists who publicly marched in support of Gabino Barreda's legacy; the *Ateneo* generation championed liberal ideals with their reinvigorated combative intellectual stance toward tradition. Embracing these contradictions, the *Ateneistas* claimed the *modernista* mantle and rejected it at the same time, separating the rebelliousness self-confidence that pushed literature into new cultural spaces

from the dogmatic romanticism that weighed down the movement's ability to adapt in a rapidly changing social and cultural environment. Paradox thus became, not surprisingly, a defining characteristic of the *Ateneo*. Octavio Paz's assertion that modern Spanish American poetry is part of the "tradition of rupture" in which continuity and novelty propel poetic ideas forward emphasizes the power that paradox can have for cultural innovation. As he explains: "La modernidad es una tradición polémica y que desaloja a la tradición imperante, cualquiera que ésta sea; pero la desaloja sólo para, un instante después, ceder el sitio a otra tradición que, a su vez, es otra manifestación momentánea de la actualidad" (16). The past and present come together as writers and intellectuals search for the most adequate way to express their vision of the future; but the precariousness of their social position forces them to constantly adapt.

From a contemporary standpoint, the kinds of change that González Peña calls for in *La musa bohemia* are not very radical. He does not promote political or social reform on a scale like the revolutionary figures that were gathering forces in opposition to the Díaz regime in other parts of Mexico. Nevertheless, the novel does affirm that, within the Porfirian power structure, literary work, both in the production of novels and journalism, was hindered by the withdrawal of the artist from society and also by his professionalization. In order to correct these excesses, *La musa bohemia* reasserts the centrality of Mexico's geographic and social reality as the raw material for literary creation and moral action.

## Conclusion

Debates about the role of literature in Mexican society shaped the formation of *modernista* discourse for more than thirty years at the end of the nineteenth century. From Magda's tortured confrontation with materialism in Gutiérrez Nájera's *Por donde se sube al cielo* to Nita's resolute rejection of Mauricio's self-serving pursuit of intellectual prestige in González Peña's *La musa bohemia*, *modernista* novels developed a new critical discourse that boldly challenged literary tradition and pushed Mexican intellectuals to recognize that change and uncertainty accompanied processes of modernization. In the *modernista* novel Mexican readers encountered new, unfamiliar, and unexpected representations of Mexico's national identity and social order. Readers could also recognize the skeptical stance regarding the emerging popularity of positivist science that pushed the groups of *modernista* intellectuals to explore alternative realms of experience, including Catholic spirituality, psychology, astronomy, and—importantly—literature itself.

Fierce debates between competing literary and social philosophies in the Porfirian press defined the contours of a growing field of cultural production which could influence Mexican society and politics. *Modernismo* worked within this field as a counterweight to more deterministic narrative practices rooted in materialism. The *modernistas* approached literature and art as inspirational cultural products that explored the possibilities and uncertainties of the modern future. *Modernismo* in Mexico repositioned literature in social discourse as a necessary and vital tool to address the effects of modernization. As a discourse, it advocated for individual free will as a tool for confronting uncertain moral situations. The desire to change or react to change was both abstractly moral, as it was for the anxious protagonists of Nervo's early novels, and also cultural, as González Peña demonstrated through Mauricio's struggle with ill-fated

models of writing at the end of the Porfiriato. As a rallying cry for dozens of journalists, poets, novelists, and artists, *modernismo* united many intellectuals in a common enterprise that sought to connect Mexico to the cosmopolitan community of nations. The term *modernismo* itself also provided definition to the tastes and attitudes of an expanding class of urban professionals who were eager to fight for legitimacy in the shifting social landscape of Mexico's capital city at the turn of the century.

Debate and provocation were powerful tools for Mexico's *modernistas* and were essential to the formation of *modernismo* in Spanish America's most populous country. From the moment in 1876 when a youthful Gutiérrez Nájera challenged the restrictive definition that Pantaleón Tovar placed on "poesía sentimental," public polemics not only helped the *modernistas* define their own ideas, they also defined *modernismo*'s role in society. "Si el señor P.T. se digna contestar nuestros artículos," El Duque Job confidently stated at the end of "El arte y el materialismo," "continuaremos la polémica dilucidando las cuestiones que sobre el amor y la mujer suscita" (32). The polemics indeed continued, both during Gutiérrez Nájera's lifetime and afterward when Nervo, Valenzuela, and Tablada founded the *Revista Moderna*, and Cravioto and his brethren shouted down Caballero's initiative to resuscitate the *Revista Azul*. In these public disputes morally liberal writers developed sympathies with one another as they established contacts in Mexico City's newspapers and literary circles. Conservatives, too, began to recognize that the *modernistas* were beginning to transform Mexico's cultural attitudes and that the "traditional" view of Mexican culture needed to be reformulated and rearticulated. Throughout these exchanges, writers appealed to literary and philosophical examples from Mexico and abroad, building their cases to guide Mexico's growing population of literate citizens as well as the representation of Mexico within the community of nations.

This desire to debate and provoke is perhaps one of the most enduring effects of *modernismo* in Mexico. Even by the time that the *Ateneo de la juventud* had donned the *modernista* mantle, the more spiritualistic and cosmopolitan facets of *modernista* literature had become tarnished; interest shifted to exploring anew Mexico's unique physical and historical circumstances. Nevertheless, the *Ateneo* adopted the *modernistas'* provocative stance as a group of intellectuals united around a common aesthetic and philosophic project. Some may argue that placing emphasis on the role of provocation and debate in the formation of Mexican *modernista* discourse begs the question or arrives at an obvious conclusion. If literary change occurs at all, these critics would say, would we not expect it to arise through debate and disagreement?

Discussions of what is or is not literature certainly seem irrevocably connected to all practices of literary creation, but in the case of late nineteenth-century Mexico, these discussions publicly interrogated the relationship between literature and society. The *modernistas* proposed that literature was uniquely empowered to fill voids left by the declining influence of the Catholic Church, and to challenge the shift toward materialist philosophies under the political hegemony of the Díaz regime. Debate was not only the outward expression of the *modernista* challenge to traditional institutions and systems of cultural influence, it was also a tool for the formation of *modernista* discourse in the first place. Disputes over aesthetic principles brought Porfirian intellectuals together, creating opportunities for collaboration like *Revista Azul* and *Revista Moderna*, *Savia Moderna*, or, in the case of Mexico's conservatives, the *Biblioteca de Autores Mexicanos*. These debates were not isolated to the combative journalism of the nineteenth century, they were evoked and invoked within the novels that represented the *modernista* view of Mexican society as well.

On several occasions in the twentieth century literary disputes honed aesthetic positions and united intellectuals in ways that evoke the *modernista* disputes of the Porfiriato. In closing, I would like to mention three specific subsequent cases of public debate regarding literary style that further defined the relationship between the field of cultural production and fields of politics and social relations in Mexico: the 1920s dispute regarding the “literatura viril” thesis of Julio Jiménez Rueda; the editorial reactions to the student massacres in 1968; and the *Crack* generation whose brazen manifesto in 1996 defined a new kind of novelistic poetics in negative terms.

In the 1920s, after the violence of the Mexican Revolution had largely subsided and the new revolutionary government had begun to rebuild national institutions, Mexican intellectuals took up the question of how to express Mexico’s national identity in a post-revolutionary context. On December 24, 1924, Julio Jiménez Rueda published a column in Mexico City’s *El Universal* entitled “El afeminamiento en la literatura nacional,” in which he publicly pondered the absence of a “poetic, narrative, or tragic work that serves as a summary or index for the public unrest” of the Mexican Revolution. His essay knit together several arguments about literary production that—despite the decade-long violent uprising—sustained several of the Porfirian disputes that I have described in this dissertation, namely concern about whether or not Mexican authors are overly submissive to foreign trend and doubt about the ability of Mexico’s cultural infrastructure to support the literary production imagined by the small community of writers. Jiménez Rueda framed these questions with a gendered metaphor, arguing that “today the literary family submits willingly to the unproductive task of negating itself.” Calling out Mexico’s intellectual class for being too “effeminate,” Jiménez Rueda concluded by warning Mexico that decadence would threaten to destroy the Mexican *pueblo*. The familial metaphor as

well as images of old and young people connected the esoteric subject matter with fundamental concerns about the future of Mexican nationalism. Ignacio Sánchez Prado has signaled the apolitical aspects of this debate and how the definition of “national literature” had become detached from the power of the State. But as he also observes, it yielded a divide between conservative Catholics and more cosmopolitan writers (35). This moral-oriented dispute can be traced back almost three decades to the concerns that Victoriano Agüeros and Victoriano Salado Álvarez voiced over the emergence of *modernismo* in the 1890s (35).

Jiménez Rueda’s polemic focused attention on the ability of literature to respond to the social needs of the Mexican public. Francisco Monterde quickly and famously responded to Jiménez Rueda by arguing that Mariano Azuela’s *Los de abajo* was the work that would define the Mexican Revolution. But the individuals whom Jiménez Rueda targeted with his gendered accusations of effeminacy and degeneration were the writers who collaborated at the literary magazines *Contemporáneos* and *Ulises*, men like Salvador Novo, Manuel Maples Arce, and Xavier Villarrutia. These men were the cosmopolitan urbanites who seemed detached from the more gritty realities of the Mexican countryside and the violence of the Revolution, men who appeared to sympathize with the *modernista* desire to create literature that challenged the nationalistic status quo. Viviane Mahieux has pointed out that Novo “opted to privilege an urban form of cultural citizenship in his work,” and that as one of the most cosmopolitan figures in the 1920s Mexico City he was often labeled as “effeminate” (101). Novo responded to Jiménez Rueda a month later by sarcastically drawing attention to Jiménez Rueda’s anachronistic taste: “¡Lástima que no podamos definirlo con un epitafio que tengo reservado para mi tumba: ‘era tan moderno, que le encantaban las antigüedades’” (Schneider, *El estridentismo* 124). Novo went on to assert that due to Jiménez Rueda’s preference for colonial literature he had no place to



“impugn modernists [*los modernos*] for being insufficiently virile” (124). Luis Mario Schneider carefully documents the back-and-forth of 1924 and 1925 to show how the more cosmopolitan writers used the polemic in a critical moment of self-definition. Arqueles Vela published “La sonrisa estridentista” at the end of 1925, a manifesto that gave shape to the *estridentista* movement of innovation and renovation in Mexican literature. In Jiménez Rueda’s anxiousness about the divergence between his desire for a certain kind of realist, nationalist literature and the styles he observed among more cosmopolitan writers echoes of the *modernista* debates of the Porfirian can be heard. The critical gap between the masculine and feminine intellectual figures in Jiménez Rueda’s metaphor became the space for a public dispute that further defined the role of Mexico City’s literary vanguard and also produced a genre with direct ideological ties to the Revolutionary state, the *novela de la revolución*.

Decades later, in 1968, a violent and dramatic sequence of events fundamentally altered the post-revolutionary relationship between the Mexican cultural and political fields. Strikes held by students and workers threatened the stability of the post-revolutionary political regime, the Partido Revolucionario Institucional, and the repressive tendencies of the government were laid bare on October 2, when soldiers and police opened fire on a large gathering in the Tlatelolco Square in Mexico City. As a consequence of the Mexican government’s brutal demonstration of force, intellectuals and writers who had once worked for and supported the PRI began to question their allegiance to the regime. Octavio Paz, future Nobel laureate, publicly resigned his diplomatic post in India, and dozens of young reporters and writers began to document the reaction of Mexico’s shocked public.

After the events of ’68, Paz and other intellectuals began to use their cultural clout in more explicitly political ways. Paz founded the monthly literary review *Plural* in 1971, but when

a more radical group of leftist writers took over at *Siempre!* soon thereafter, the outlines of a public polemic begin to form. Carlos Monsiváis, Héctor Aguilar Camín, and Enrique Krauze used the latter periodical as a platform to launch volleys against Paz, who, in their view, was overly suspicious of the Marxist left and overly cautious about adopting extreme political tactics (Preston & Dillon 411). In 1971 Aguilar Camín and Krauze publicly antagonized Paz and another giant of the Mexican intelligentsia, Carlos Fuentes, writing that “a nuestra imprecisa cultura nuestros intelectuales sólo pueden oponer una finta o una herida, no una obra” (Krauze, “Por el camino”). When Paz and Fuentes fired back that the younger writers were “siamese intellectuals” and that they only had one brain between their two bodies, a new aesthetic-political polemic began to take shape. John King writes that this exchange revealed a clear rift in Mexico’s intellectual field, one which grew as Paz’s political and cultural program became more explicit (34). Over time the rivalry between *Plural* and *Siempre!* evolved into more explicit political debate between *Vuelta*, Paz’s publication, and *Nexos*, a more diverse political platform. Jorge Volpi describes the arrangement between the two publications in this way:

mientras *Vuelta* estaba hecha a la imagen y semejanza de su director, se preocupaba fundamentalmente por la literatura y la historia de las ideas y seguía apasionadamente la senda marcada por Paz contra la izquierda, *Nexos* parecía más interesada en la vida política y era una amalgama que reunía tanto a escritores de izquierda como a académicos y políticos con posiciones no siempre coincidentes. (191)

Although *Nexos* did not focus on literature, literature was not off the magazine’s radar. Aguilar Camín, the editor at *Nexos*, wrote several novels during the 1980s.

The rivalry between *Vuelta* and *Nexos* throughout the 1970s and 1980s divided Mexico’s intellectual camp between traditional liberals (*Vuelta*) and socialists (*Nexos*); successive rounds

of polemics pushed these groups further and further apart, both in terms of Mexican politics, and also in terms of their aesthetic tastes. Residue from the debates that produced *modernismo* can be found in the gallons of ink spilled between the political right and left of the Mexico's cultural field, but new patterns also developed. Socialism was not a popular political idea for Porfirian intellectuals, so it may not be surprising that both sides of the *modernista* debates ended up being coopted by the liberals at *Vuelta*. Writing in 1988, Krauze—Paz's acolyte—accused Fuentes of being a “Guerilla Dandy” in a caustic review published in *The New Republic*. His attack bears the mark of conservative criticisms of *modernista* cosmopolitanism from the previous century: he decries Fuentes as a foreign-born author who writes unrealistically about Mexico and whose work is “brilliant and insubstantial.” At the same time that Krauze was heaping punishment on Fuentes for being an outsider in his own country, Paz embodied a political and aesthetic program that bore a strong resemblance to Gutiérrez Nájera's affirmation of artistic liberty. In Yvon Grenier's description of Paz's aesthetic and political beliefs, one can see several points of resonance with El Duque Job's challenge to materialism in 1876:

Paz's idea of a mutually beneficial relationship between literature and politics is predicated on the imperative of freedom. Art and politics must remain distinct realms while complementing each other in the overall adventure of the human experience. Taboos and superstitions of the political sort, typically rigid and universal in their applications, tend to make for bitter and overpowering ingredients in an intellectual recipe such as painting or literature—these are best understood as modes of thought of unique, sensitive, contradictory, and mortal individual characters. (108-09)

Grenier's portrait of Paz evokes many of the traits of *modernista* writers that I have described in this dissertation. Paz was a modernist poet who had studied the formation of Mexico's literary

tradition throughout his career. The endurance of the arguments from the previous century, however, is more than a deliberate self-fashioning on the part of any single author; it reveals a profound anxiety about the relationship between literature and Mexico's national identity that cannot be resolved. Public polemics like those that erupted between the writers at *Vuelta* and *Nexos* perpetuated a dispute that not only honed aesthetic and political positions among competing groups of intellectuals, but also demonstrated the continued belief that literature could and should be a tool for national progress.

During the 1990s the political and economic forces of globalization began to transform Mexico. And much like the *modernista* writers who used literature as a venue for exploring the uncertain future of modern society, a new group of Mexican novelists emerged with an innovative program that challenged literary convention: the *Crack*, a group of five young male novelists who coauthored a manifesto in 1996 that combatively advocated the renewal of Mexico's literary production. The *Crack* proposed alternative genealogies of Mexican literature that stretched back to the *Contemporáneos*, and Jorge Volpi—perhaps the most successful writer to emerge from the *Crack*—mentioned Amado Nervo in his manifesto statement as an “artist by force.”

The dense and complex novels produced by the *Crack* writers are clearly the product of a postmodern worldview shaped by scientific and psychological discovery in the twentieth century, but the *Crack* manifesto also recycled and redeployed several aesthetic principles that would have been familiar to the readers of the *modernista* polemics of the Porfiriato. Renovation and renewal were high priorities for the *Crack* writers because, in Eloy Urroz's view:

Los riesgos y el deseo de renovación han languidecido. Una laguna de varios lustros empantana de ausentismo el entorno de las letras, ya sea con novelistas que no escriben,

o, peor aun: con escritores que no pueden llamarse novelistas. Son pocas, siendo francos, las excepciones y sus novelas no pasan de ser buenas, repito: educadamente buenas, sin ningún terror que contravenga el insulso contrato social, la insulsa norma literaria.

(Chávez Castañeda 215)

Urroy's complaint echoes the concern that several *modernistas* voiced about the Academia Mexicana and their role in maintaining stagnant literary practices and tastes that were ill-suited to Mexico's changing circumstances. Even though the members of the *Crack* agreed that Mexican literature needed to be renewed, they did not share a specific aesthetic approach; Ignacio Padilla wrote that "si algo está ocurriendo con las novelas del Crack, no es un movimiento literario, sino simple y llanamente una actitud" (Chávez Castañeda 217). This attitude appears similar to Max Henríquez Ureña's concept of the "sensitivity" that guided *modernista* literary production. The *Crack* also recognized that several obstacles could impede the development of their program, including a very small public of readers and competition with mass media. Literature, Pedro Ángel Palou wrote, needed to use literary forms and language, which is why he asserted that "Las novelas del Crack no están escritas en ese nuevo esperanto que es el idioma estandarizado por la televisión. Fiesta del lenguaje y, por qué no, de un nuevo barroquismo: ya de la sintaxis, ya del léxico, ya del juego morfológico" (Chávez Castañeda 213). The baroque aspects of the *Crack* novels linguistically challenged convention in ways that the *modernista* novels studied here only hinted at; Gutiérrez Nájera, Nervo, and González Peña all created fairly plain social worlds, and their stories were often quite simple in comparison with the "totalizing desire" that Ricardo Chávez Castañeda ascribed to the representation of the world in the *Crack* novels (Chávez Castañeda 221).

Though the arguments from the Porfiriato that I have identified in these three examples have been transformed by political and social changes throughout the twentieth-century, literary style continues—even after 2010—to be the object of fierce debates in aspects of Mexican intellectual life, including politics, social policy, and national identity. The enduring legacy of the *modernista* debates lingers in each of these cases; though the *modernista* discourse that challenged conventional moral and aesthetic attitudes has been taken up by writers of different political ideologies and social positions throughout the twentieth century, the rhetorical position adopted by the *modernistas* and their successors has maintained tension with notions of a fixed cultural identity and ideas that resist transformation and change.

In this dissertation I have interpreted *modernista* novels in the context of Mexico City's vibrant journalistic atmosphere and the circumstances of Mexico's experience of modernization. Though the circulation of *modernista* texts and the meetings of *modernista* intellectuals in Paris and elsewhere undoubtedly made *modernismo* a hemispheric cultural phenomenon that united writers throughout Spanish America, I have shown that, at least in the case of Mexico, it also played an important role in the formation of national identities and cultures. My goal was to analyze the formation of Mexican *modernista* prose in dialogue with more hemispheric approaches to *modernismo* in order to show continuities and singularities between *modernismo* writ large and the Mexican case. My hope is that future studies will adopt this approach and refine the notion that "Spanish America" is a single cultural space in world culture or in global capitalism.

Even though writers like Martí, Darío, and Rodó made pan-American appeals in their *modernista* writing, not every community in Spanish America was dealing with the same anxieties or concerns. I have shown that in Mexico *modernismo* did not primarily explore

Spanish American cultural identity, nor did it challenge the encroachment of the United States' enlarged sphere of influence; it was a fraught struggle between science and religion, between literary convention and innovation, between cosmopolitan ambitions and national traditions that provoked significant debate among the country's elite. Recently, Volpi—the *Crack* novelist—expressed concern regarding the assumption that every nation in Latin America shares cultural or political beliefs. He warns in *El insomnio de Bolívar* (2009) that this totalizing reading of Latin America, popular in literary criticism, threatens to commodify cultural products from throughout the hemisphere. Though Volpi admittedly looks back at the turn of the century as a time when there was an “authentic Latin American culture” he firmly rejects any claim of its persistence (80). He reminds twenty-first century readers that claims about a common cultural practices must be treated skeptically given the particularities which shape literature in local and national contexts.

Following Volpi's warning, and recognizing the pragmatic limitations that I have placed on the scope of this dissertation, I suggest that nationalist studies of literature should be cautious about overlooking the contributions that discussions and debates within borders can offer the formation of national identity. This is especially true in countries like Mexico where uneven distributions of population, wealth, and resources between urban and rural settings produce tension between competing cultural identities. Mexico City casts a long shadow over the political, economic, and cultural life of the rest of the country, but throughout the twentieth century intellectuals and writers in the cities along Mexico's Northern border have engaged in dialogue with their peers in Mexico City and in the United States as they explore the unique cultural space of *el norte*. And the Zapatista movement in Chiapas has, for more than two decades, advocated greater protections for Mexico's indigenous populations and drawn attention

to interaction of diverse languages and cultures throughout the Mexican landscape. The regionally-specific aspects of these conversations in time and space must be taken into account, as should the shape and characteristics of the relationship between each region and the larger Mexican nation. For scholars of the Porfiriato, more research remains to be done on the relationship between representations of urban and rural life, both by authors publishing in Mexico City and in provincial capitals. Also, a more thorough understanding of the role that specific booksellers played in the diffusion of *modernismo* and the rival conservative literature would both provide a more detailed account of the circulation of literature in the Porfiriato and illustrate connections between Mexican literary tastes and those in other parts of Spanish America, Europe, and the United States.

The *modernista* challenge to tradition became its own tradition as successive generations of Mexican intellectuals sought to define themselves as products of a unique set of circumstances that required new and different cultural and political attitudes. Twentieth century polemics consistently reached back to the polemics of the Porfiriato, which themselves were rooted in the moral and philosophical debates of Mexico's civil wars during the mid-nineteenth century. Shifting expectations of moral behavior that accompanied economic and technological modernization inspired Mexico's *modernista* generation to portray characters in difficult and unpredictable moral situations. Idealism, both in literary form and spiritual transcendence, was the object of *modernista* innovation, especially its challenge to the deterministic materialism of positivism and narrative realism. United in the pursuit of idealized aesthetic and moral forms, the *modernistas* revealed that free will could be transformative and destructive for Mexican society. The desire for freedom from the restrictive limitations of tradition and convention brought the *modernistas* together, and even though the cosmopolitanism of Gutiérrez Nájera and Nervo was



later compromised by the nationalist orientation of the *Ateneo de la juventud*, the enduring legacy of *modernismo* allowed individual writers to express themselves freely and band together to create new kinds of cultural products for the Mexican public.

## Notes

### Introduction

1. Gwen Kirkpatrick has suggested that *modernismo* could be approached as a discourse to orient investigations of the choices that shaped *modernista* cultural activity. In *The Dissonant Legacy of Modernismo* (1989), she argued that scholars should remember the “audacity” of the *modernista* writers and the “sweeping display of subject matter and styles” found in their poetry (6).

2. Cottom identifies Jewish exile, evolutionary ambition, urban anxiety, and youthful rebellion as essential, and often contradictory, aspects of the “discourse of bohemia” (9).

3. For an economic history of the Porfiriato, a good point of departure is John Coatsworth’s *Growth Against Development*; for social history, William Beezley’s *Judas at the Jockey Club*; for political history, the early chapters in the first volume of Alan Knight’s *The Mexican Revolution*.

4. Gabino Barreda, a fifty-year-old doctor who had travelled extensively in France, adopted scientific positivism, Auguste Comte’s Enlightenment-minded philosophy, in the design of the curriculum of the *Escuela Nacional Preparatoria* (ENP) in Mexico City in 1868. Positivism encouraged students to use observation and induction in order to conceive of universal laws of behavior and meaning. The ENP became a symbol of ideological renewal and modernity for decades to come, especially for the political elite that emerged from its classrooms and carried its philosophy to other sectors of the government and the Mexican nation. See Leopoldo Zea’s *El positivismo en México* for an ideological interpretation of the movement. For more information on the ENP, see Lemoine.

5. In *Eros pervertido: La novela decadente en el modernismo hispanoamericano* (2010)

Karen Poe filters decadentism out of the *modernista* assemblage to highlight the most contentious challenges to moral and social order in the *fin del siglo* Spanish American novel. Drawing on a queer theory interpretive framework, she demonstrates that decadentism was directly adversarial to traditional customs and social practices, and that the eroticism and sexuality expressed through *decadentista* novels were “a way of life” and “a mode of subjectification” (18).

6. In his *Antología del modernismo* (1970), José Emilio Pacheco arrived at a similar conclusion to Paz, identifying the *modernista* legacy in Mexican letters as a “tradition of impossible discipleship” (li).

7. Celia del Palacio Montiel of the Universidad de Guadalajara has coordinated a substantial research project investigating the development of printing and journalism in the Mexican states. She summarizes this research in “Una mirada a la historia de la prensa en México desde las regiones. Un estudio comparativo (1792-1950).”

## **Chapter 1: Reimagining Mexico with Manuel Gutiérrez Nájera**

1. Clark de Lara published *Por donde se sube al cielo* in Gutiérrez Nájera’s *Obras* in 1994 based on text found in 17 *folletines* published in *El Noticioso* between 11 June and 13 July 1882. Page numbers in this chapter refer to a 2004 edition of the novel, published without Clark de Lara’s extensive editorial notes.

2. Moral purity was one aspect of the representations of romantic relationships in Spanish American *modernismo*. Another was the representation of sensuality, perversion, and erotic

desire. The story of *Por donde se sube al cielo* explores the encounter between these contradictory aspects.

3. Although female writers and journalists began to publish in Mexico in the 1880s and 90s, very few were accepted into the literary and journalistic “establishment.” Laura Méndez de Cuenca was an outstanding exception.

4. According to Rama, the *letrados* were the dominant intellectual figures of nineteenth-century Latin American culture, a group of elite men who emerged intact from the colonial past and worked in an urban context to preserve the powers of writing in metropolitan institutions: “No sólo sirven a un poder, sino que también son dueños de un poder” (*Ciudad* 31).

5. Gutiérrez Nájera’s plagiarism has been well documented, both during his life and by literary historians. Clementina Díaz y Ovando analyzes one particularly thorny episode when Gutiérrez Nájera was attacked by Vicente Riva Palacio, and states that “Para los literatos de aquel entonces los plagios del ‘duque Job’ no eran ningún misterio, ni constituían ninguna novedad, plagios reconocidos por el mismo Gutiérrez Nájera, quien en el año 1882 hizo pública esta su debilidad.” (123). For other examples of El Duque Job’s plagiarism, see Mauleón.

6. E.K. Mapes’s rigorous documentation of Gutiérrez Nájera’s works has provided invaluable resources to generations of scholars of the Porfiriato. His account of the use of pseudonyms in Gutiérrez Nájera’s journalism can be found in “Manuel Gutiérrez Nájera. Seudónimos y Bibliografía periodística.”

7. Justo Sierra, a member of the Díaz regime and influential poet and educator, wrote after El Duque Job’s death in 1895 that Gutiérrez Nájera’s work had transformed Mexican literature through the deployment of eroticism and French style alongside representations of traditional Christian spirituality. “El enjambre de cantores,” Sierra stated, “que pueblan hoy los

aires con sus notas, aquí y acaso en toda la América Española, despertó en su nido y voló, gracias al mágico prestigio de la voz de Manuel” (412). Sierra’s metaphor corresponds with the image of the writer that Gutiérrez Nájera himself cultivated: a protective figure, like a nesting bird, who nurtured his (literary) offspring and modeled for them a spirited intellectual lifestyle.

8. Antonio Saborit and Rafael Pérez Gay both pointed out these sympathies in their papers at the 1995 *Coloquio*.

9. Daniel Cosío Villegas uses the term “República Restaurada” in his monumental *Historia Moderna de México* to describe the period between 1867 and 1876.

10. One mode of the novel that Altamirano describes is the “novela social,” which, in the analysis of Adriana Sandoval, is associated with the ideological position of liberalism that believed in the innate goodness of human kind. The “novelistas sociales,” she writes, “tienen fe en el progreso y creen que el hombre es capaz de perfeccionamiento” (31).

11. Critics have attempted to position El Duque Job on a continuum that ranges from direct social commentary to esoteric “art for art’s sake” solipsism. Alicia Bustos Trejo supports the social commentary position when she claims that Gutiérrez Nájera’s choice of eclectic themes and topics seeks to “crear conciencia” among the indifferent bourgeoisie (493). José Francisco Conde Ortega is more dismissive of the social dimensions of El Duque Job’s work and he argues that the Porfirian poet-journalist restricted himself to building solidarity in an isolated world of metropolitan elites (“Duquesa Job” 343). A more moderate position regarding the social aspects of Gutiérrez Nájera’s writing has become the critical consensus; Ivan Schulman describes it well when he claims that El Duque Job is not a “contestatory” writer, but that he is concerned with social transformation: “En la construcción de su imaginario los artistas de la primera generación modernista—la de Gutiérrez Nájera—luchan por definir el ego y afirmarlo

frente a los códigos de una realidad disgregadora y metamórfica cuyas normas socioeconómicas son el productos de la cultura mercantilista” (16-17).

12. Schulman interprets the novel similarly, claiming that “Este y otros escritos de GN narran tanto la cultura y la nación mexicanas como la sociedad decimonónica americana” (23).

13. Rafael Gutiérrez Girardot argued in 1983 that even though the bourgeoisie in the Spanish American republics was relatively small compared to France or England, that “principles of bourgeois society” joined with utilitarianism to produce a “profound transformation” of culture and society throughout the region (29).

14. Gutiérrez Nájera’s most famous poem, “La Duquesa Job” articulates a slightly different response to the tension between European and American hegemony in the formation of Mexican national identity. One stanza repeats: “Desde las puertas de la Sorpresa / hasta la esquina del Jockey Club, / no hay española, yanqui o francesa, / ni más bonita, ni más traviesa / que la duquesa del Duque Job.” Two of Mexico City’s landmarks (the Sorpresa and the Jockey Club) associate the Duquesa with Mexico’s national specificity. Separated from the Spanish, American and French cultural influences with which she, the poetic voice, and the implied audience are all familiar, she is neither subservient to European values nor is she detached from their circulation.

15. Historical studies of the press during the Porfiriato have demonstrated that many more periodicals appeared in Mexico City’s newsstands, relative to the number of inhabitants, than elsewhere in the Republic. In 1884, the 45 documented periodicals represented one per 7,208 residents (González Navarro 682).

16. This is not a homosocial relationship. Provot and Raúl hardly interact in the narrative and seem to have no connection outside of Magda.

17. According to some estimates, there were almost 40 spaces for theater and spectacle in Mexico at the end of the nineteenth century, including the largest and most influential theaters: the *Teatro Principal*, the *Teatro Abreu*, and the *Teatro Nacional* (Recchia 235; J. L. Martínez 37).

18. The tense erotic relationship between Magda and the narrative voice evokes a similar style in Gutiérrez Nájera's theatrical reviews. In her reading of *El Duque Job*'s descriptions of famous divas, Magdalena Maíz-Peña observes that "Gutiérrez Nájera [...] ofrece insólitamente el trazo, el diseño, el modelo de representación del cuerpo femenino de una diva que no se erotiza o sensualiza solamente, sino que además patentiza la mirada erótica del lector/espectador desde fuera del escenario" (266). Through erotic, or at least sensual descriptions, *El Duque Job* inserts the female performer within a rigid moral system, observing how she may threaten expectations and at the same time condemning her based on his "detached" position of authority.

19. In a review of contemporary French and Spanish theater, Gutiérrez Nájera wrote:  
Vamos al teatro para divertirnos, mejor que para sentir la puta y limpia emoción estética. Pedimos lo frívolo, lo vistoso, lo halagüeño, lo sonriente, lo deslumbrador; que la música sea alegre, que nos admire la magnificencia del edificio, que cautiven nuestra vista las decoraciones y los trajes; que las actrices sean hermosas; que el bufón nos haga reír, y que el poeta nos dé algo nuevo y excitante que remoce nuestros cansados estímulos sensuales. ("El teatro español" 150)

20. Clark de Lara has noted that a similar statement appears in one of Gutiérrez Nájera's short stories, "Historia de un cronista." The comment in that story reads: "Cuando la mujer se resuelve a hacer de su belleza un negocio por acciones, el mercado mejor es el teatro" ("Introducción" cxxxi). The key difference between the short story and the novel is the differing

agency ascribed to the exchange. Magda is not the (only) agent of the commodification of her beauty; instead, an impersonal statement expands the criticism to address a more expansive economic system in which Magda plays a role.

21. In her reading of the “novelistas sociales,” Sandoval explains that “Las soluciones planteadas descansan, en muchos casos, en una concepción religiosa del mundo, vinculada con la necesidad de practicar los valores cristianos originales” (32).

22. This latter debate exploded in 1880 over the selection of the appropriate ethics textbook at the influential *Escuela Preparatoria Nacional*. For a detailed analysis of this debate, see Hale, *Transformation*.

23. She further ventures that this was the reason why the novel was never formally published (cxxxviii).

24. The narrator describes these depressing works: “Jane Grey ante el tajo fatal, cerca del verdugo que llora, y Lord Strafford pasando su mano a través de los barrotes de su prisión” (80).

25. The narrator goes on to describe his apartment as “un cuarto de un sedentario, de un ‘intimista’ que guardaba el recuerdo de un sueño en cada flor de su, papel” (sic, 75). Regarding interior spaces, Aníbal González has argued that “For Nájera, the temporality of the interior is arbitrary and capricious, subject to the whims of the self, and the interior as a whole is regarded as a space where the self, given free rein, can indulge in hallucinations, games, and erotic pleasures” (29). The interior spaces in this novel, however, appear to be more useful than harmful, sites of reflection and protection from the outside world. Thus, Gerard Aching’s interpretation of the *reino interior* in Spanish American *modernismo* seems more appropriate for approaching this aspect of Gutiérrez Nájera’s work. In Aching’s view the separation between interior and exterior spaces allows *modernista* poets to psychologically, rather than



institutionally, respond to their social environment “by assimilating and restructuring the social order through the practice of [...] art” (36).

## Chapter 2: The cult of *el ideal* in the early novels of Amado Nervo

1. Nervo was baptized with the name José Amado Nervo Ordaz in Tepic, a city that, in 1870, was part of Jalisco state, but which became the state of Nayarit in 1917 (Jiménez Aguirre, “Amado Nervo” 531).

2. Writing in 1975, Luis Mario Schneider recoiled at the lack of attention that this public polemic had received in discussions of the formation of the *Revista Moderna* (*Ruptura* 150).

3. All three novels were published individually and later gathered into a single novel. Page numbers in this chapter, except where otherwise noted, refer to the edition of Nervo’s *Obras completas* edited by González Guerrero and Méndez Plancarte.

4. Differences between Nervo and other *modernistas* threatened to break apart the unified front that Nervo hoped to form under the banner of *modernismo*, particularly after his departure from Mexico. Ciro B. Ceballos called Nervo a “sonámbulo” of *modernismo* at one point (J.M. Martínez, “El público femenino” 390), and Marcela Reyna, reading letters exchanged between Nervo and Jesús Emilio Valenzuela, the financial patron of the *Revista Moderna*, has shown that Valenzuela blamed Nervo for not promoting the *modernista* publication abroad. This disagree, in her view, produced the schism that ultimately doomed the periodical.

5. A very detailed—and nationalistic—description of Nervo’s burial and the commemorations of his life appears in *Amado Nervo, homenaje a la memoria del poeta*, edited and published by the Universidad Nacional.

6. Luis Leal documented how Nervo suffered neglect within the canons of Mexican Literature, but he believed that the publication of a new edition of Nervo's *Obras completas* in 1962 would help reignite interest in the Mexican *modernista*. Gustavo Jiménez Aguirre documents the reignited interest and the forty-year resuscitation of Nervo's reputation in "Amado Nervo, una obra en el tiempo." Additionally, José Luis Zárate, one of Mexico's most famous Science Fiction writers, has listed Nervo as a recommendation to his readers in an online blog.

7. In a famous speech to the *Sociedad Astronómica* in 1904, Nervo summarized the work of British novelist H.G. Wells as part of an extended commentary on the history of the moon. After paraphrasing the plot of *The First Men in the Moon* (1901), Nervo explained to his audience of fellow astronomers that "[h]e querido contar a ustedes el argumento abreviado de esta novela, para que conozcan el ejemplar más interesante que la literatura moderna ha producido sobre la Luna, esfinge de plata que en todos los siglos ha despertado vigorosamente la curiosidad de los sabios, de los artistas y de los poetas" (*Obras* II, 502)

8. José Francisco Conde Ortega describes Nervo as "un novelista original" and goes on to praise how "[e]n sus primeras novelas y en sus cuentos—la mayoría de asunto mexicano—se advierte a un observador y a un paisajista sutil y delicado" (58).

9. Debate about how to classify Nervo's novels stretches all the way back to 1898 when Salado Álvarez accused Olaguíbel, Nervo, Tablada and others of belonging to the *decadentista* school. He wrote to Olaguíbel in the review that provoked the 1898 debate: "Pertenece usted a la escuela que bajo el calificativo de decadentista encierra en su seno a otra multitud de sectas y doctrinas brotadas de ese gran semillero de ideas que se llama Paris" (204). Nervo explained in his second reply to Salado Álvarez that *decadentismo* was dead, but affirmed that it had served

an invaluable purpose as “un grito; grito de rebelión del Ideal, contra la lluvia monótona y desabrida del lloro romántico” (“Los modernistas mexicanos. Replica a Victoriano Salado Álvarez.” 251). Ironically, Salado Álvarez’s accusation about the incongruities of *decadentismo* in Mexico may have provoked Nervo to articulate *modernismo* as a unified cultural force and as a solidified discourse that could not be decried by members of the literary establishment. Ana Laura Zavala Díaz makes this claim in her reading of the debate, writing: “la discusión sobre el decadentismo fue uno de los tantos factores que propiciaron la formación de un gremio (para otros una secta) de literatos cuyo objetivo principal fue el desarrollo y difusión de las letras mexicanas en armonía con las de otras latitudes” (“La blanca” 59).

Despite Nervo’s insistence in the 1898 debate that he was not *decadentista*, the term continues to be associated with his novels. Karen Poe writes about the “novela decadente hispanoamericana” to emphasize the specific influence of French culture on Spanish American writers like Nervo and José Asunción Silva, while Nancy LaGreca, also highlighting connections between Spanish America and Europe, uses the *decadentista* label as a way of identifying a specific group of *modernista* texts that question the meaning of virtue and morality for modern citizens in *fin del siglo* Spanish America. LaGreca argues that *decadentistas* like Nervo, along with European philosophers like Nietzsche and Jung, challenged a dichotomous moral code with stories representing the complexity of psychological, moral, and spiritual experience for modern individuals (113). In her reading, Nervo stands out for his defense of introspective individuality, and his resistance to defining social interaction “through a single notion of family, acceptable literature, art, and virtue” (129). Her argument affirms Luis Alberto Sánchez’s assertion that Nervo was “one of the precursors” of the psychological novel in Spanish America (153).

10. Roland Grass, writing in 1976, argued that Nervo's novels more closely resemble the french *nouvelle* form, often interpreted as *novela corta* in Spanish ("Amado Nervo" 169).

11. This date appears in both the *cronología* published in *El libro que la vida no me dejó escribir* as well as a biobibliographical essay by Almudena Mejías Alonso.

12. Pascualillo's story is influenced by French naturalism's exploration of human behavior and its fascination with indomitable social and scientific forces. In his summary and analysis of critical theories of Spanish American Naturalism, Manuel Prendes includes both *Pascual Aguilera* and *El bachiller* in his list of Mexican naturalist works. Prendes argues that Spanish American writers like Nervo adapted naturalist ideas and narrative strategies that represented social and biological determinism as a way of challenging romantic individualism (49).

13. Prendes argues that *Pascual Aguilera* expresses the "arbitrariedad existente en esta ordenación de las relaciones sociales" (305).

14. Ángel del Campo (1868-1908) is the other writer that Frías y Soto recognizes as part of this new national literary practice.

15. In the *Obras completas* a line of dots fills the column. In the *Otras Vidas* edition, the line of dots fills the page. The dots are equally spaced to visually disrupt the textual flow of the narration.

16. Within the legal structures and traditions of nineteenth-century Mexico, Asunción could not inherit the hacienda on her own.

17. The Spanish words "espíritu" and "alma" are used interchangeably in the text to describe Alda. As Estéves explains: "Un alma es un espíritu que informa un cuerpo, del cual no depende sino para las funciones vitales" (201-02).

18. See Bliss, Buffington, and Buffington and Piccato.

19. Christopher Conway reads the amorous triangle in *El donador* as a sinister harbinger of a persistent fear of feminine agency and independence. Conway's reading emphasizes that Esteves does not suffer heartache or approach madness, unlike his compatriot Antiga, because he rigidly controls the souls in his possession. Comparing the two men, Conway argues, leads readers to see women in the novel as "a menace to the integrity of masculinity itself" (475). Conway reminds contemporary readers that in *fin del siglo* Mexico, many men were preoccupied with the agitations for greater social and political freedom for women. I would add that another reason that Antiga cannot sustain his relationship with Alda is that he does not acknowledge her freedom to choose him. In this view, a man's tight-fisted control ultimately leads to a woman's independence, both from cloistered life and from her bewitchment.

20. Phillipp-López interprets fantastic literature in the context of Spanish America's experience of secularization and integration into global capitalism when he defines fantastic narrative as "a genuinely modern aesthetic mode" (33). Conflict and complexity, he observes, characterize the fantastic stories written by *modernista* writers throughout Spanish America.

21. This quotation is one of the citations from the entry for speculative fiction in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, and is drawn from Heinlein's *Grumbles from the Grave* (49).

22. For example, Enrique Krauze has documented the spiritualist beliefs of Francisco I. Madero, the wealthy landowner and victor in the 1910 Mexican Presidential election who believed that he could speak with spirit of Benito Juárez. Krauze transcribes a fragment of a letter that Madero directed to his father: "Among the spirits that fill space, there are some who are greatly concerned about the evolution of humanity, about its progress, and each time an event

of importance is about to happen in any part of the world, a great number of them take on bodies, in order to save one or another nation from the yoke of tyranny” (*Mexico* 251).

23. Theodore W. Jensen has documented several Pythagorean aspects of *modernista* aesthetics in *El donador de almas*, especially the attraction of opposites. He argues that “In the doctrines of Pythagoras they [the modernists] sought solutions to the chaos and disorder of contemporary society, more humanistic ones than those devised by the cold logic of positivism, then firmly entrenched in Latin America” (391).

24. In the *Obras completas* this last section is not included as part of *El donador de almas*. González Guerrero and Méndez Plancarte place it under the heading “crítica literaria” in the second volume, entirely divorced from the novel. In order to maintain consistency, I continue to cite the *Obras* pagination.

25. In one response, Tablada called Salado Álvarez “el despótico señor de horca y cuchillo” (“Los modernistas” 232). When Salado Álvarez later wrote to Nervo that “el insulto personal y la diatriba descomedida no deben de ningún modo figurar como argumentos” he was undoubtedly referencing Tablada, to whom he never directed a reply (“Los modernistas mexicanos” 286).

26. See Piccato, *The Tyranny of Opinion*.

### **Chapter 3: *Modernismo*’s Conservative Critics: Victoriano Agüeros and José López Portillo y Rojas**

1. In his analysis of Mexico’s participation in several World’s Fairs, Mauricio Tenorio Trillo has documented that nationalism and cosmopolitanism developed alongside each other in Porfirian culture. Striving for recognition from other Western nations, Mexico needed to articulate its national uniqueness with discourses taken from European science and politics,

namely anthropology and liberalism (95). With a constructed Aztec Palace and a revised national history book, *México a través de los siglos*, the Mexican delegation to the 1889 World's Fair in Paris presented Mexico's unique pre-Colombian and colonial past using the language of modernity that they shared with European peers. Nationalism and cosmopolitanism were united as the representatives of the Mexican state, the "wizards of progress" in Tenorio Trillo's words, tried to pilot Mexico toward modernization (71).

2. Writing about Altamirano and his cohort, Agüeros brazenly wrote that "Los de 1867 introdujeron en nuestra literatura ideas y tendencias corruptoras, que lejos de prometerle días de gloria, sólo amenazaban quitarle el encanto y natural sencillez que hasta entonces había tenido" (168).

3. Belém Clark de Lara has noted that Gutiérrez Nájera was "constantly arguing" with Agüeros in the Mexico City Press (Gutiérrez Nájera, *Obras XIII*, 166). Mejías Sánchez believes that the relationship between the two men improved with time and that Gutiérrez Nájera deliberately withheld criticism of the Catholic newspaperman from some of his critical writings (Gutiérrez Nájera, *Obras I*, 251).

4. Agüeros became a corresponding member of the *Academia Mexicana* in 1902 and occupied seat XIII in 1909. (Gutiérrez Nájera, *Obras I*, 251). López Portillo was elected in 1892 and took seat IV in 1903 (J.L. Martínez 251).

5. Pineda Franco observes that the *Revista Moderna*, which sold for \$.50 pesos per issue beginning in 1898, was probably cost-prohibitive for most workers and spoke more directly to "un sector afluente, competente, ciudadano" (257). The Biblioteca was probably directed at a similar class of readers, particularly families sympathetic to the critical and Catholic perspectives of *El Tiempo*.

6. These last articles are dated 1883, 1894, 1895, and 1894.

7. “Los que disfrutan de algunas rentas y tienen aversión al trabajo, los diputados, periodistas, gentes sin ocupación ni obligaciones, pasan la vida en las tercenas y peluquerías, donde forman tertulia y hablan de cuanto quieren: de literatura, sin haber leído nada; de teatros, sin haber estado atentos a la representación; de política, sin preocuparse del porvenir de la patria; y, sobre todo, de crónica escandalosa, que es el manjar favorito de sus pláticas” (61-62).

8. Seigel writes: “The expanding public sphere provided the frame for an enlarged and unregulated realm of private experience, within which people could invest the objects made available to them with hopes or desires generated inside themselves” (437).

9. In another essay, Agüeros paraphrased an unidentified writer to reassert this point: “Si al proclamarse, pues, la independencia, México no alcanzaba todavía el grado de civilización que querían algunos, culpa fue del tiempo y no de España, según la oportuna y galana observación de un poeta célebre” (355).

10. It surely is not coincidental that two of these same authors receive high praise in Agüeros’s critical assessment of Spanish letters: “En México estamos acostumbrados a admirar la vigorosa y elevadísima inspiración de Núñez de Arce, la gracia y profundidad de Campoamor, el ingenio, la ciencia y la elegancia de Valera: todas las cualidades, en fin, que enriquecen y engalanan la moderna literatura castellana” (224).

11. “Un pueblo en que se desconoce este ramo importantísimo del saber humano, está muy lejos de progresar, de perfeccionar sus instituciones, de mejorar sus costumbres e ir por el recto sendero del engrandecimiento intelectual” (182).

12. Although Agüeros was the first to publish *La parcela*, it was republished, with several reprintings, by Porrúa beginning in 1945. Since the Porrúa text is more readily available



and accessible, I cite page numbers from the 1961 edition. An electronic copy of the Agüeros text, scanned from the holdings in the Stanford University library, is available as a free ebook from Google Book Search.

13. Realism in nineteenth-century Spanish American narrative began with the representation of national history, geography, or local customs as a way of projecting responsible models of behavior on the newly-constituted citizenry of independent nations or as a way of challenging European hegemony of the natural and cultural knowledge of the Americas. This practice, known as *costumbrismo*, eventually gave way to a more “scientific” and “objective” narrative practice inherited from French and Spanish writers that made character types and situations less symbolic and more specific, which allowed authors to address social problems more directly. Brushwood defines *costumbrismo* not as a movement, but as a “special interest in portraying the customs of a particular time and a particular place.” With their interest in local color and behavior, *costumbrista* novelists wrote “social novels” that signaled the strengths and weaknesses of contemporary morality (*Genteel* 13).

14. As the narrator reminds the reader halfway through the novel: “Nunca se había visto semejante cosa en aquella ciudad de costumbres patriarcales, donde se conservaba la prístina sencillez de tiempos mejores” (221).

15. *La parcela* employs many *costumbrista* narrative strategies, but the narrative’s success at creating a realistic portrait of rural Mexican life is debatable. In Jiménez Rueda’s view *La parcela* develops reasonable descriptions of local customs and environments, but Navarro strongly disagrees, pointing out that in comparison to other realist novelists from the nineteenth century, López Portillo’s descriptions are relatively weak and nonspecific (171). Carballo agrees with Navarro’s judgment, stating: “La realidad que desea aprehender en sus obras no

corresponde a la realidad histórica. *La parcela* retrata aspectos de la vida rural, mas los aspectos que muestra están retocados por su sensibilidad ascética y devota” (78).

16. In a report for the national Ministerio de Fomento in 1891, Mariano Bárcena recorded in his registry of Jalisco the description of two haciendas that used waters from the Covianes river, a source of water mentioned in the first chapter of the novel. One was Cruz de Duque (460) and the other was San Marcos (487).

17. While concurring with Brushwood’s judgment, Carmen Ramos Escandón argues that *La parcela* can be read as an historical source of *hacendado* thinking:

By focusing on the conflict between the two *hacendados* instead of between the Indian communities and the *haciendas*, López Portillo is depriving the novel of its social content and leading us to believe that the land struggle was rather a pastime in which the *hacendados* engaged, more out of boredom than out of economic interest. However, the landowners who entered this dispute participate in it with a clear conscience that their social prestige was at stake. This attitude confirms the views that the *hacendado* class of Porfirian Mexico still operated very much within the framework of a feudal mentality in which economic motivations are not the determinant element of their conduct. (126-27)

18. Ángel de Campo, Federico Gamboa, and Amado Nervo all explore the physical dangers of the city in more detail.

19. Leo Bersani describes this kind of omniscient narration: “The pleasant, personal tone of the narrator in addressing his audience suggests his willingness to give this marvelously available, final, and defined world to his readers” (81).

20. I am not arguing that illustrative and representational narrative is a zero-sum game, but rather that *La parcela* is much more illustrative than representational. Several scenes in the

novel, particularly those involving Roque, realistically capture uncomfortable feelings of injustice. But even these do not probe psychological depth in a way that distracts from the narrator's omniscient representation of the community drama.

21. López Portillo cites *The Pickwick Papers*, *Nicholas Nickleby*, and *Oliver Twist* as exemplary novels in the prologue to *La parcela*, and Scholes, Phelan, and Kellogg agree that illustrative characterization was essential for the social commentary in Dickens' novels. Taking Pip from *Great Expectations* as an example, they argue that Dickens's young hero "is typical [...] and his story has the concentrated power of the moral exemplum which draws strong support from the consensus ethos of its time" (170).

22. "Every obstacle that the lovers encounter heightens [...] our love for the possible nation in which the affair could be consummated" (Sommer 48).

23. On this point I follow Rama's approach to Latin American writing. In *La ciudad letrada* he explains that writing was a "sort of secondary religion" in the colonial era that became the basis for an entire symbolic order made of constituent elements that "ordenan el mundo físico, normativizan la vida de la comunidad y se oponen al desperdicio y al particularismo de cualquier invención sensible" (33-35).

24. Yliana Rodríguez González aligns the criticism of Camposorio's behavior with "the lack of benefits achieved during his time abroad" rather than with "foreign experience" itself (80). Although she rightly points out that not all foreigners receive the same critical treatment in the narrator's eye, I would suggest that Camposorio's obstinate refusal to embrace local customs is an essential justification for his negative characterization in the novel, not simply a lack of seriousness in his professional labor or his obvious moral shortcomings. In the eyes of the judgmental narrator the judge's neglect of Mexican history and custom is especially deplorable.

**Chapter Four: The Uneasy Alliance between *Modernismo* and Nationalism in Carlos González Peña's *La musa bohemia***

1. William Raat reminds readers that many *Ateneísta* intellectuals were devoted *porfiristas* who adapted to political reality after the Revolution began in 1911 (165).

2. Piccato persuasively revises the history of Porfirian journalism to conclude that government subsidies expanded the influence of newspapers, and consequently, the sphere of public opinion (71).

3. Fellow *Ateneísta* Rafael López wrote the following about Xochimilco in a *crónica* in 1913: “Es un placer para los que están obligados a respirar el aire de la ciudad toda la semana, emigrar, siquiera sea los domingos, a esos sitios que multiplicaban sus notas risueñas por todas partes y que ahora se ostentan con los dones de la estación florida” (76-77). After signaling that Xochimilco is a refuge from modern, urban life, López also connects Xochimilco with Aztlán and the pre-Colombian past (78).

4. González Peña, in a collection of essays that explore the transatlantic circulation of literary ideas during the nineteenth century, reminds readers that the *Ateneísta* generation felt that national culture and identity needed to occupy a more prominent position in literary production: “Sobre lo extranjero tendíamos a afirmar lo propio. Atentos a lo nuestro, amorosos de lo de casa—y por ello mismo—, extendíamos con infinita simpatía la mirada hacia vastos horizontes lejanos” (*Más allá* 24).

5. In debates about the role of the government in public education, for example, Porfirian writers often appealed to the theories of Herbert Spencer, Charles Darwin, and Auguste Comte to defend their positions. The stakes of these education debates extended to the treatment of indigenous populations where differences in determinist positions revealed disagreement about

whether or not the indigenous communities could be incorporated into modern economic and bureaucratic structures. For more on these political expressions of positivism, see Hale.

6. William Raat's reading of Mexican positivism is a helpful point of departure here. He argues that French positivism "tuvo desde un principio implicaciones políticas, religiosas y morales, aparte de las estrictamente lógicas y científicas" (11). In his scathing criticism of positivism, Leopoldo Zea also recognizes the expansive impact of positivism on Mexican life: "El positivismo fue traído a México para resolver una serie de problemas sociales y políticos, y no simplemente para ser discutido teóricamente. Su expresión teórica fue, por supuesto, desconocida por las masas sociales de México; pero no así su expresión práctica, que fue sentida en diversas formas, tanto por los conocedores de la doctrina como por los ignorantes de la misma" (36).

7. Auguste Comte, *The Positive Philosophy of Auguste Comte*, in Lenzer, 72.

8. González Peña was born in Lagos de Moreno, Jalisco in 1885 (twelve years after Mariano Azuela was born in the same city). He moved to the capital in 1902. Years later González Peña wrote that his first impressions of Mexico City were dizzying, and that the size and density of Mexico City produced in his young provincial self a profound sense of despair (*Gente mía* 11-12). Before long, however, he became entranced with the variety of intellectual and literary activities in Mexico City; by the time he passed away in 1955 he had finished a career as an accomplished journalist who published *crónicas*, columns, and editorials in *El Mundo Ilustrado*, *Arte y Letras*, *Revista de Revistas*, and *El Universal* (J.L. Martínez, *El ensayo mexicano* 186). He was commissioned by the Secretaría de Educación Pública to write his influential *Historia de la literatura mexicana* in 1927 and inducted as a rostered member of the

*Academia Mexicana* in 1931. González Peña dedicated most of the rest of his life to writing *crónicas* and columns in Mexico's newspapers, producing several volumes of collected writings.

9. Emmanuel Carballo has written that “Don Carlos se encuentra más próximo como novelista y cronista a las corrientes literarias de fines del siglo XIX y primeros años del XX que a las tareas renovadoras emprendidas por el Ateneo de la Juventud” (9).

10. González Peña's other novels include *De Noche* (1905), *La Chiquilla* (1907), and *La Fuga de la Quimera* (1919).

11. Male patrons of prostitutes in Mexico City came from all social classes, but many of the women were poor and unmarried (Bliss 23-61). Adoption and wet-nursing were hot-button topics in the popular press. More prosperous families became the models for childcare practices, which forced poorer families to adapt to State controls (Blum 72-73).

12. As he introduces Nita's enjoyment of reading, the narrator remarks: “Por un espejismo natural en su temperamento de amorosa, entusiasmábase con frases y tipos, no por la perfección que entrañasen, sino porque encarnaban los ideales de su dueño” (21-22).

13. Adela Pineda Franco's reading of both publications summarizes this argument well. See chapters 3 and 4 in her *Geopolíticas de la cultura finisecular*.

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